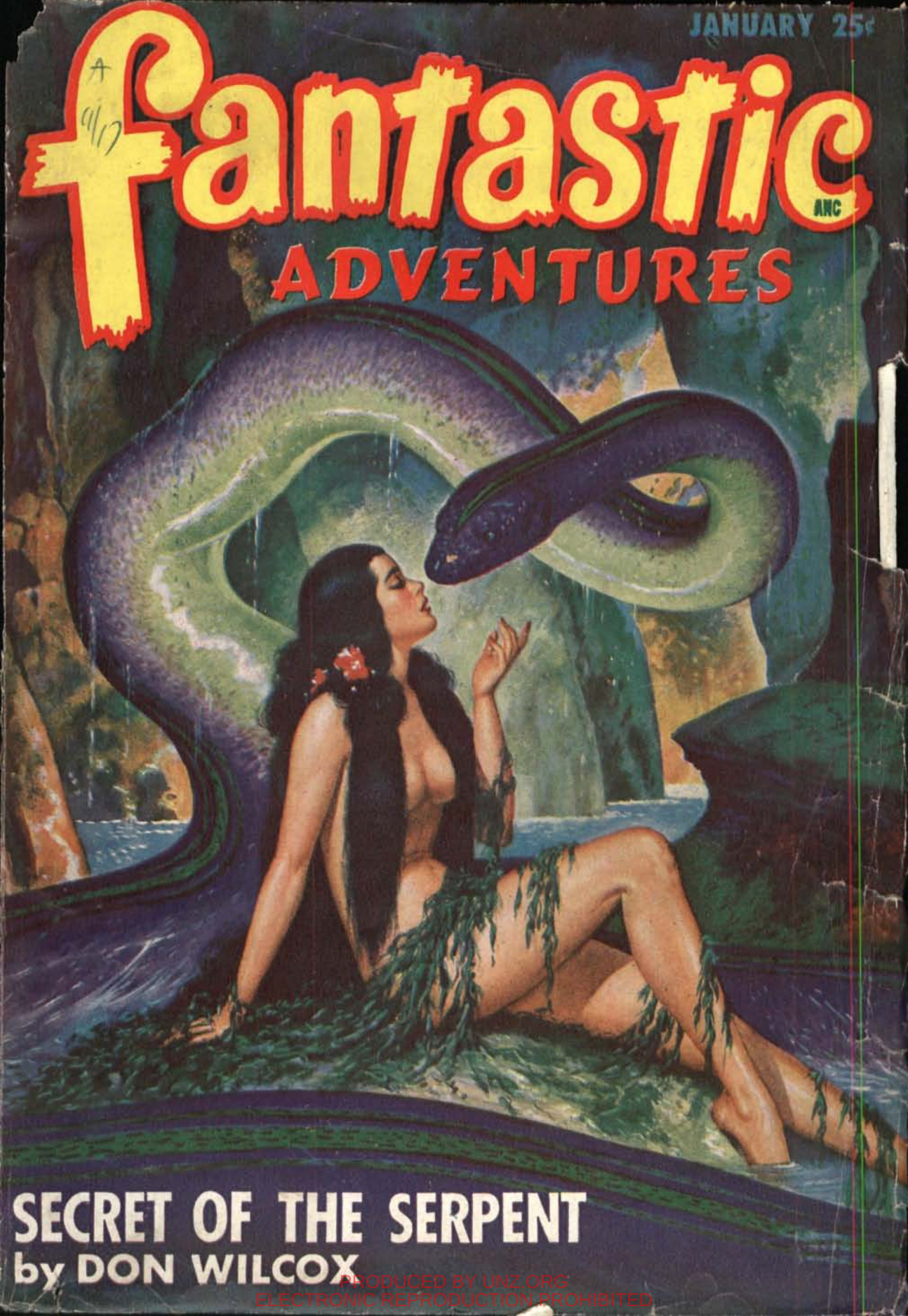

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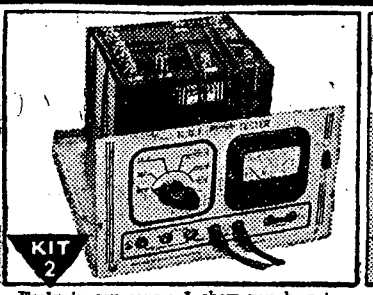

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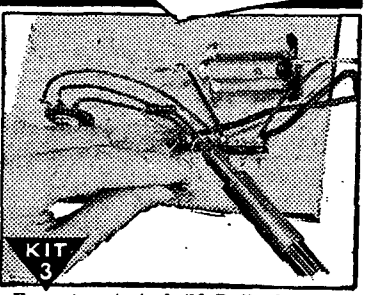

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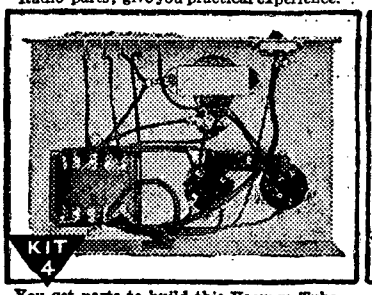

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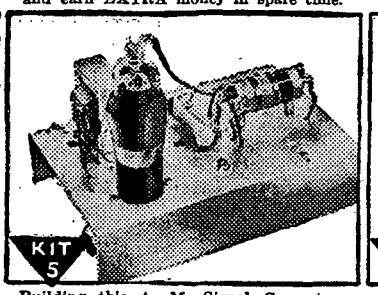

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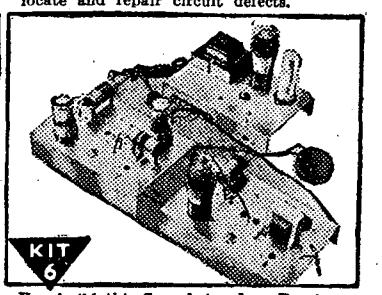

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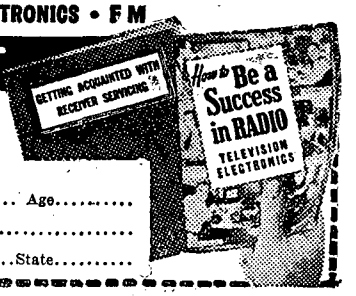

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "Secret Of The Serpent."

Back cover painting by Malcolm Smith.

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VOLUME 10 NUMBER 1

All Stories Complete

SECRET OF THE SERPENT (Short novel—35,000).....by Don Wilcox..... 8

Illustrated by Robert Gibson Jones

Bob Garrison found himself on a strange world, in a strange body—the body of a serpent!

THE FIRE TRAIL (Short—7,000).....by Oge-Make..... 66

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A true story of an ancient Navaho rite—with an important message for all of mankind . . .

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Eerie balls of mist hung over the swamp island, waiting for any living thing . . .

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THE DRUMS OF MURD (Novelette—20,000).....by H. B. Hickey..... 132

Illustrated by Malcolm Smith

When the drums started beating, Lane Magruder followed them—into a strange, evil world.

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

YOU already know the good news for this month if you've taken a good look at the cover. You're right, we're talking about Don Wilcox and his new short novel, "Secret Of The Serpent." This is one of those typically "Wilcox" stories, if you get what we mean. And that ought to be plenty judging from Don's popularity. At any rate, this yarn will take you to a world where nature seemed to have gone mad. You know the old phrase—*I ain't got no body*—well, on this particular planet a man never could be sure he did have one! At least the type of body he was used to. It's a humdinger of a story and all you Wilcox fans will love it. . . . And while we're talking about the cover story, let's not forget the cover itself. Bob Jones, who in our humble (it says here) opinion is the best cover man in the fantasy field today—or any day, has turned out another beautiful job. You'd be surprised at the number of requests we get every month for Jones originals.—Or maybe you wouldn't, as many of you who are reading this right now have written in yourself. Anyway, we'd like to say in answer to all these requests that we only wish we could supply you with some of Bob's fine work, but all of our covers are held for future use in over-seas editions of FA. And we know you wouldn't want to deprive the fantasy fans "over there" of the same pleasure . . .

WE PULLED a fast one on our big sister magazine, AMAZING STORIES, this month. Knowing how much you readers like Robert Moore Williams' stories we just couldn't resist the temptation to "steal" one of them for this issue of FA. You might say that the yarn is not strictly a fantasy, but it does have all the well-known ingredients that Bob is famous for putting into his stories. So when you get to page 80 and start reading you'll find some first class science-fiction, with enough of a fantastic background to satisfy everyone!

WE'RE presenting another story by the de Courcy writing team this month. We feel safe in saying that "Evensong" is a fine story of mood with a very neat fantasy pitch. The de Courcys did a good job—we think. Let us know what you think after you read it.

YOURS and our, old pal, Bill McGivern is back again too, this issue, with what we think is a really nice fantasy yarn. "Orders for Willie Weston" is a story about a young soldier who never saw the real part of a war—but wanted to join a famous combat outfit. So when his orders came through transferring him to a top-notch combat division he was very happy—until he found out that this division had been disbanded. But this didn't stop Willie, because he—whoa! We nearly spilled it. You take up the story and find out yourself!

H. B. HICKEY returns with a long novelette entitled, "The Drums of Murd." This is one of those yarns that take you out of the twentieth century and into the fascinating pages of history. But not exactly the history of our Earth as we know it. More like the history of another world, say Murd . . . What is Murd? Where is it? Well, you'll find that out when you start reading on page 132. Fair enough?

WITH "The Fire Trail" by Oge-Make, we present something extremely unusual. There are several reasons why it is unusual. One: it's true. Two: it's written by a Navaho Indian. Three: it's a sincere warning from the Indian to the White Man. Four: scientists all over the world agree with the principles set forth in the Indian warning. To elaborate, the "fire trail" is a Navaho ceremony which is very ancient and very mystic. In it, a man in a trance leaves his body, travels through space and time. Last summer, Oge-Make did walk the fire trail! He went to ask a question vital to the existence of the Navaho people. He met with disappointment. But he did bring back a message—*to the white man!* Thus, every word in "The Fire Trail" is truth, and the message has been passed on to the white man in the only way found possible, through this magazine's pages! It was passed on to us by L. Taylor Hansen, noted scientist, who, along with many other scientists whose opinions we have, gives great credence to the danger outlined in this mystic warning from the red man from out of the dim past and the far reaches of space. So read the story and *think! We* believe it. And, when you've read it, read the message following it and DO SOMETHING about THAT! The Navaho Indians have done all they can to warn us, passing on the most sacred ceremony of their tribe. Let's return the favor, so desperately needed!—WLH

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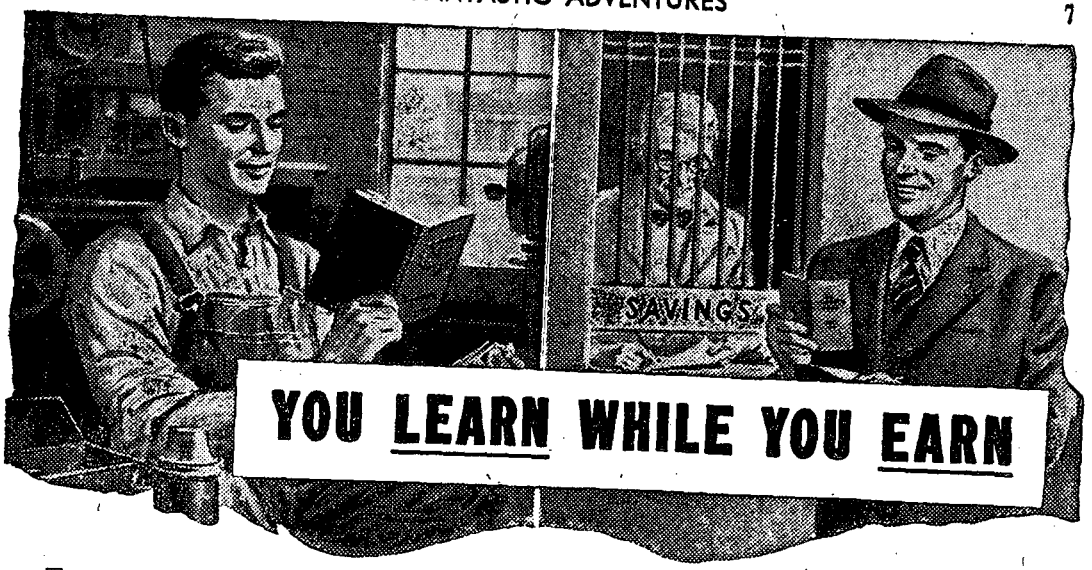

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My jaws clamped around the struggling body of the pygmy as he screamed . . .

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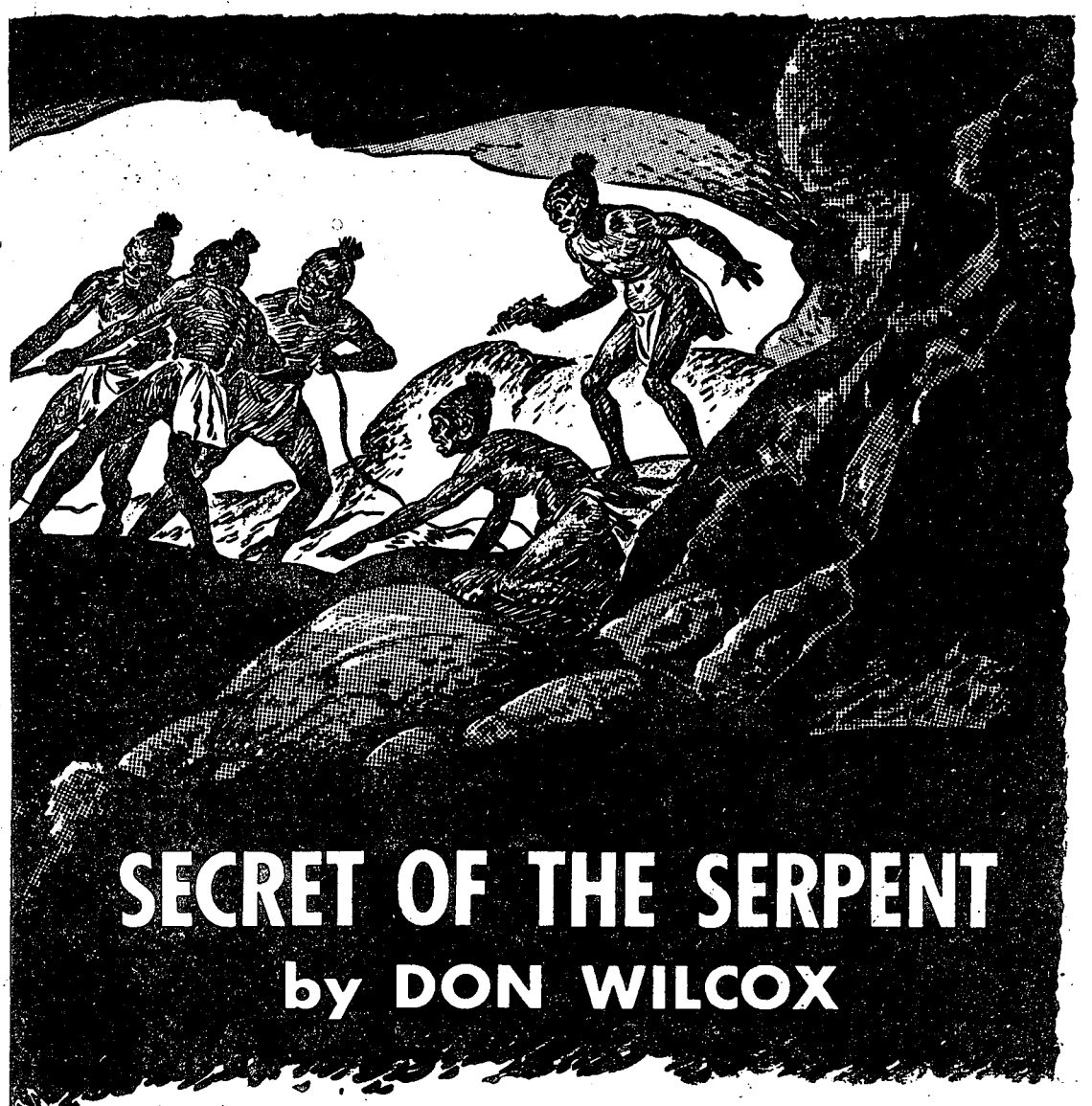

SECRET OF THE SERPENT

by DON WILCOX

Bob Garrison had forgotten everything about his former life — but in his new life as a serpent he had a great deal to learn

I STRAINED to keep my head out of the water as I floundered around in the blackness, trying to find a way out. The warm air smelled of blossoms and I think I should have been lulled back to sleep if it hadn't been for the water that kept rising around me. Sleep?—how long had I been sleeping? How long had this complete blackness engulfed me? How did I happen to be here? Where did I come from? *Who was I? What was my name?*

A sickening feeling ran through the

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length of my long, coiled body. I didn't even know my own name. I had forgotten everything—everything that I was supposed to know in order to carry out my desperate purpose. *What* purpose?

WHAT PURPOSE?

I screamed within my mind like a woman falling to her death. There *had* been a purpose. An urgent purpose—something far more important than the life or death of any one man.

But how could I have a purpose relating to the life or death of any man when I was only a coiling, writhing mass of flesh, lost in some underground blackness, with an awful sleepiness engulfing me, and black water rising around me, and blossom-scented air lulling me into sickening illusions of nothingness.

I tried to fight the water back with my arms—*I had no arms—I had no legs*—and my efforts resulted in the random thrashing of my long, snake-like body.

I was a serpent!

I had been a man, and I had fallen through the dense purple clouds as a man—I was beginning to remember now. I had come to this ghastly space island, where the outcasts of the many planets were sent—to live or to die—and at the very minute that I had been sure I would land safely, I had suddenly fallen.

To die? No, to sink into a mire of blindness, deep in a crevice, where no sun-like eye of the heavens could penetrate. And there, in the slimy waters of a greenish black river, I had fought to keep my grip on those last few precious minutes of life. Broken bones, crushed skull, life's blood ebbing away, pain, pain, such burning pain, such child-like terror of the unknown that is death—and then—*merciful sleep* . . . .

But now my consciousness was returning, sharp and sensitive, and my new snake-like body was finding ways to swim.

I swam cautiously, holding my serpent head about a foot and a half above the surface of the water. Presently a light broke through the deadly blackness—a streak of green which skipped along the surface of the inky waters.

The ripples of green expanded. The cavern walls gradually changed from coal-black to rock-brown, and I lifted my head to look up through hundreds of feet of vertical surfaces. The planet's outer surface would be up there somewhere, perhaps two or three miles above the waters of this deep-cut stream. I was a prisoner—yes, twice a prisoner. A prisoner of the deep crevasse and a prisoner of some ghastly trick of nature that had given me this serpent's body.

I LOOKED back, now, and studied the forty-foot length of purple and green body that was now my dwelling place. It was frightening and revolting and sickening, and I hated the sight of myself, and immediately I wished—

Oh, what a wish! What an awful thing to wish, at the very moment I was hating myself so intensely.

I wished that I could frighten someone else! I wished to see someone else revolted and sickened by the flash of my green and purple tail through these black waters.

I would find someone!

It was a hideous purpose, but I was a serpent, and it was my purpose. I was no longer an honored emissary from the earth who had come to this far-off space island with the purpose of *finding*—

WHAT WAS MY PURPOSE?

For a moment it had almost flashed back to me; but now it was gone again, and only the snake in which I dwelt could dominate my actions. I wanted

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to frighten someone, and so I swam through the twisting, sharp-edged passage.

Here the walls were only five feet apart, and as I tried my luck at climbing I discovered the strength of my coils. In the dim light I saw, for the first time, that hundreds of folds that gave form and design to my yellowish-green belly. The wall's sharp edges prodded me with only trifling jabs of discomfort. It wasn't bad, this business of crawling. It came easy. I was beginning to like it.

"If you're a snake," I said to myself, "you don't actually *mind being a snake—*"

I was speaking half aloud, and my breathy hiss fascinated me. I tried it again.

"If you're a snake—snake—s-s-s-snake—*s-s-s-s-sss!*"

My hiss echoed up through the walls and there came an answer!

"Look out, down there!"

It was a human voice and it rang down through the walls like a fire alarm.

"Look out!" it cried. "There's a monster!"

Up through the hundreds of feet of jagged brown walls I caught sight of seven or eight tiny figures of human beings who were working at the upper end of a long rope. Then I saw, as my eye followed downward to the near end of the line, the object of their warning cries. Two little men, clad in loin cloths, had been lowered to a shelf of rock not fifty feet away from my present position.

I say two *little* men, for they looked to me to be not more than two and a half or three feet tall.

"Pygmies!" I said aloud. Then, with another satisfying hiss, "Pygmiesssssss!"

The two little fellows were wild with fear at the sight of me. They clambered along the perilous ledge, trying to get back to the rope by which they had been lowered. I could see that they had been working with ropes and nets of their own, evidently trying to fish something out of the river.

Things happened fast, then, for my serpent instincts worked more powerfully than my human intelligence.

One of the pygmies slipped and fell.

He struck the surface of the water with a splash. I could see him there in the deep green shadows, a black form bobbing up at the edge of the rock wall.

I slithered down to him. He screamed and struggled, but I caught him in the coils of my body and crushed him. Then my jaws opened wide and I took him in.

One quick, painful swallow, and I got him down.

The men above were firing at me now, so I swam hard back into the darkness where their rays couldn't touch me. My belly was full, and I was comfortable and secure in my warm black waters. *Except* for the dull torture of my human conscience, I was *happy* to be a serpent.

CHAPTER II

THE first animal I met, other than the little human animals I had encountered in the river walls, was another monster, who like myself, was not quite at home in his hideous form. The very sight of him gave me a great deal of mental trouble.

If I had had no more mind than an ordinary serpent I might not have suffered any agony whatever. I might have attacked him, and either he would have killed me or I, him.

But that bothersome streak of human intelligence which I still possessed—the remnant of my previous existence,

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which was still haunting me—made me know something very important about this new monster.

It made me know that he, too, was a person who had been transformed.

I met him on the very rim of the crevasse on the morning that I found my way to the top. I had climbed through the long, long night, by the light of six different moons—or neighboring planets, I couldn't be sure which. These heavenly bodies had crossed over the deep gash that had imprisoned me for so many hours, and each time I caught sight of one, sailing slowly across my thin line of sky, I felt compelled to climb, faster and faster.

Each time one passed on, out of sight, I felt weak and exhausted from my effort and wished that I were again at the surface of the water. I belonged in the water. I was safe there. No, there was another moon sliding into sight—I must climb up toward it—faster, faster!

When the star-eye which this far-off planet called its sun at last began to gray the sky with morning I was sure that the night had lasted for scores and scores of earth hours, and I knew that there would also be a very long day ahead. It wouldn't be wise for me to start back through the deep descent until I had at least found some nourishment. Somewhere there must be more pygmies. I kept my eyes sharpened for the sight of any movement along the surface of the rocky ledge. And there, in the pink light of dawn *I saw it*.

It was large, for a cat—large enough to be a draft horse or a small elephant—but that wasn't what made it such a weird and formidable sight to my eyes. It had two heads, and its four eyes, always turned in the same direction were casting their baleful greenish-yellow glare glow at me as I ascended.

The cat-like body hardly moved. I might have expected it to bound away in fear, but it stood its ground. My coils carried me up through the last twenty feet of ascent and I worked my way, as limber as any earthworm, along the edge.

The double-headed cat-monster watched me with its four steady eyes. When my flipping tail struck a loose stone and sent it clattering down through the crevasse, the cat-monster didn't wink an eye, but simply went on staring at me. The hair began to rise on its back. Its claws emerged, thin white lines that spoke a warning.

I stopped, holding my head about four feet above the surface of the boulder upon which my chest—if it could be called a chest—had crawled to a stop. I drew my head back a few inches and slowly opened my jaws.

The cat-monster's shoulders hunched dangerously, and the beast showed his sabre teeth.

JUST then the slight rustle of feet sounded from a heap of rocks to my left, and I turned in time to see the first shot fired. The tongues of red flame darted out from the muzzles of three guns.

Pygmies again!

They were shooting at the cat-monster! One blast—two—three! Deadly rays of *zeego* fire. I had seen enough of it on the earth, I should know. Whoever the pygmies were, they possessed *zeego* ray guns that had certainly come from the earth.

My human impulse was to leap over the rocks and pounce upon the little men with my fists swinging. But human impulses were only a handicap to my new body. It worked on principles of its own, and instantly I was crawling at high speed.

With fangs bared, I pounced upon the surprised trio. Three *zeego* guns

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dropped. Two of the pygmies were running down a cliff path as hard as they could go. Their feet thudded with a fancy little rhythm that reminded me of a military drum I had heard somewhere. The other sound was the scream of the third pygmy, whose voice might have been compared to a screech of a clarinet in high register. It ended with a gurgling, choking sound as my coiling body closed around him.

One's serpent habits take hold quickly, I found. Without debating the matter, I simply gulped him down.

I would have given the other two a hard chase, then, if it hadn't been for another cry that chilled my cold blood. The monster-cat—in pain—dying? I wondered. It had certainly been struck by the rays of *zeego* fire. I slithered back over the rocks to the cliff's edge.

The creature had been struck across both of its foreheads, just above the four eyes—four greenish-yellow eyes that were wide with pain and terror.

The lids all began to close simultaneously, for a moment I thought the cat-monster was dying. Its shoulders sank and it went down, and it was shrinking—

Shrinking, smaller and smaller—crying with pain—crying with the voice of a girl—

It was transforming into something—something more nearly human. Its two heads were growing smaller. Its body was losing the fur covering, growing whiter. Pink shoulders caught the pink sunlight. Human arms were forming, clasping the breasts of its human body and then it was running from me, from one projecting rock to another, until it had hidden somewhere in the crags.

I watched, not daring to follow.

When it looked out, peering cautiously through the clump of bushes at the foot of the crags, I saw that its arms and shoulders were those of a beautiful girl. Its two heads had been reduced in size to correspond with its human body, but they were not human heads. They were feline heads, in every detail, and their four cat-like eyes were all watching me with deadly suspicion.

I went back to where the three *zeego* ray guns had fallen and wondered how I could manage to pick them up and use them.

CHAPTER III

IT WAS a strange world, a world in which no new arrival could know his rights. In the first place he couldn't be sure that he knew *himself*. In the second place, he couldn't be sure of his own eyes when he *tried* to know his neighbors. In the third place, *how* could he be sure that anything he *did* know for sure today would be the same *tomorrow?*

If it isn't being too sarcastic, I must admit that this serpent was tying himself in knots, almost literally, for many hours to come.

When I would find a pool of water, and look in and see my new face reflected there, for a moment I would despise myself. Those evil yellowish eyes of mine were enough to make anyone hate and distrust me. The fine scales around my nose and jaws were almost as sly as my eyes, the way they would catch the tints from the rocks and trees and flowers. I knew that I *could* lurk in a pool where the pygmies came to pick the brilliant orange-colored water flowers—the *flopetals*—and I *could* catch enough protective coloration that a pygmy wouldn't see me until I sprang. I was sure I *could,* and if I ever got hungry enough I *would.*

But my powers as a serpent, as I have already hinted, were the source of much mental torture. It was bad enough to possess an animal instinct that would

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cause me to kill and devour little human beings. It was even worse to realize that these people must somehow be related to myself, as proved by the fact that (a) they were human and (b) they talked English and (c) they used earth-men's weapons.

Probably you've never had an occasion to eat a human being. But if you have, you know that *after* your stomach is filled and your soul is again at peace with the world, *then* you can feel all sorts of remorse for your evil deed.

I was remorseful regularly about every twelve hours. But just as regularly, too, I became quite hungry—and at such times I was guilty of hoping, with all of my forty-foot being, that the supply of pygmies wouldn't run out.

I hoped, too, that they wouldn't get too handy with their *zeego* guns. As a serpent, I had certain responsibilities which needed to be carried out faithfully. One of them was to take care of my prisoner.

I'm speaking of *her*.

Yes, *she* was my prisoner, and I was taking care of her. I was protecting her, too. Whenever I thought the pygmies were in danger of discovering her hiding place, I found a way to warn her that they were coming.

Her two cat-like heads were always alert to my coming, it seemed. Whenever I came crawling along the cliff path toward the cavern pool where she lived, I would hear her plunge into the water, and that was proof that she had heard me coming. Then I would see her—the two heads of her—swimming along quietly to the narrow opening in the wall of rock. Somehow it reminded me of a corner in a well planned zoo, for it was a perfect retreat from the passing public. The public, in this case, being one forty-foot purple and green serpent.

So it was that I kept her a prisoner, and cared for her, and came to think of her more as a pair of untamed cats, joined by a whimsy of nature into a single body. Either the water or the cave would conceal her body from my eyes, as a rule, and I ceased to think of her as having human qualities.

At first I had tried a few times to talk with her; but neither of her heads had offered any answers. I lapsed into a more frequent use of my warning hisses, consequently, and began to neglect my serpent's efforts to talk English.

ONE day—which is to say, many many hours after this very strange life had begun—something happened which changed everything almost with the speed of light.

A broken space ship came hurtling down out of the sky, and when it fell within five hundred feet of the surface it blew outward in dozens of pieces, like a shell exploding. The pieces must have scattered over at least a five mile radius, and there wasn't much chance, I assumed, that any band of half civilized pygmies would ever pick them up. And I was right.

But I was wrong in thinking that this rain of wreckage would go unnoticed.

From a mountain peak twenty-five or thirty miles away a whole squadron of planes came out to swish back and forth across the valley, and I knew that there was someone in these parts who was more concerned with this hail of trouble than the pygmies. Fifteen planes hummed over, as slowly as a hawk soars over a field in search of a mouse.

They came low over the edge of the crevasse.

I crawled back into a clump of bushes where I wouldn't be seen. I could see the two cat heads at the mouth of the small cave, so I knew that *she* was

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watching too.

"Don't let them see you," I called. It was the first time I had spoken in English for many hours. *She* looked at me and folded her white arms tighter. She moved deeper into the water so that only two pink noses and four yellow eyes remained above the surface.

A few minutes later the plane drifted directly over the small pool. By this time I had guessed that they were looking down upon every bit of lake or rivulet or feeder stream that cascaded into the deep crevasse. Why, I would learn later.

One of the planes circled back over the little pool. By this time *she* was back in the cave, and I was reasonably sure that they hadn't seen either her or me. But they threw out a package as they went over and it fell toward the pool.

It burst just before it struck. It burst like a clocd of flour—or better, sulphur, for it was creamy yellow in color. It struck the surface of the water, and there was a bubbling and hissing of steam.

Then I heard *her* cry.

I tried to interpret the wail as that of two voices, not one. There was no reason, I thought, that one of the voices should cry and not the other. Yet I somehow knew, in spite of the spine-chilling echoes of the cavern, that it was only one voice. And not a feline voice, either. It was the cry of a girl.

Instantly I plunged into the pool. It was the first time that I had tried to approach *her* since that morning when I had seen her as a dangerous furry monster. The whirl of steam blinded me for a moment, and the fumes caught in my lungs and seemed to burst out through my chest—if I could call it a chest—and thudded out like pounding hammers at my shoulders—

My *shoulders?*

The fumes stung my lungs, and the steam burned at my eyes, and then suddenly it was over and the air was clear, and there was the pool of blue water, with my long snake-like body showing green and purple through the waves.

I was ashamed to be there, so close, then. For the *girl* in the cave before me thought I was being ill-mannered to intrude upon *her.*

The *girl?* Yes, with the same white arms folded tightly over her breasts, and the pink light of the sun kissing her pink shoulders. She moved down a little deeper into the water, so that only her head—her beautiful human head, with flowing dark hair, a pair of frightened dark eyes, and lips parted in speechless wonderment—showed above the surface of the water.

I *knew* this person. I had seen her before. Where? When? If I could only remember how this had all come about—

She spoke, then, breathlessly.

"Look, Bob, you have *arms* now," she said. Then, "You *are* Bob, aren't you?"

CHAPTER IV

BEFORE I had a chance to answer, she cried, "Hide quick! They're coming!"

The hum of planes was on us almost without warning. I made a dart toward the cave—*her* cave—and at the same instant I caught sight of my own reflection in the water—my vicious-looking eyes! That was what turned me back. As a serpent I didn't trust myself to invade her private refuge. I whirled about, and the water splashed high around the rocky walls.

"Quick! Get out of sight!" she cried.

I crawled faster than I had ever crawled before. I thought I was headed in the right direction to make the clump

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of bushes before the planes came too close. But I was wrong on both counts. With my serpent's head whirling to keep watch on their approach, I missed my direction and sped right into the crevasse!

My human arms grabbed frantically at the ragged edge of rock. What a futile gesture! My muscular forty-foot body was racing too fast to be caught by a thin pair of arms. I rolled into the opening.

As I fell, I caught myself momentarily on the first ledge. My head and neck fought to catch around the rocky projections, and my hands beat at the walls for a hold. But the bulk of my body was already falling, like the loops of a cable, and if I had tried to hold fast I would surely have snapped my head off.

It was a strange thought for my mind to feed upon as I fell. Some boyhood experience was coming back to me. In the fields—in the pastures—somewhere long ago on a more friendly planet, the earth. The snakes of those fields may have been friendly, but I was a boy and a snake was a snake, and I had used to kill them by grabbing their tails and cracking them like a whip to break their necks.

I was falling, falling, down and down through two or three miles of rocky walls. I was turning, writhing, twisting, trying to widen my coiled body to catch like a steel spring within the narrowing walls.

Rip! The curve of my side struck a projection, and the green and purple pattern tore with a gash of red.

Within a hundred feet of the bottom, I managed to straighten out my body so that the loop was in a vertical plane, and the wall burns were avoided.

Splasssssssh!

What an echo, up and down through the crevasse. I sank under instantly, still I heard it, and it seemed that the greenish-black waters were alive with the sounds for minutes afterward.

When my head emerged and again I began to breathe the soft blossom-filled air, my first thought was of the girl. She had called me *Bob*.

Was I Bob?

What had made her think that I was anything more than a slimy reptile?

The thought was too much for me, burdened as I was by a water-spanked belly and a torn side. I relaxed and failed to find the stamina I needed to keep my consciousness from ebbing away. I fainted away in serpent sleep.

CHAPTER V

WHEN I awakened, the moons were sliding slowly over my tiny streak of sky. There would be hours of night before I should be able to see any human figures at the top of the opening. And I was hungry.

"I'm hungry," I said aloud. "It's good that *she* isn't here now."

When you speak aloud, that way, you always stop and wonder whether someone might have heard you. Maybe that's what gave me the weird feeling that someone *had* heard, and that I was in the presence of company. I tried not to rustle the waves as I stretched my neck and peered into the surrounding darkness. I listened. Nothing but the low gurgle of water and an occasional complaining murmur of my empty intestinal tract.

I made a disheartening discovery, then, and I groaned aloud. I wondered how a mountain climber would feel if he got almost to the top and then skidded on the ice and slid all the way back and had to start over.

It had taken me hours and hours of work to get to the top the first time, and here I was back in the depths again.

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But that wasn't all. *My arms and hands were gone!*

With a commendable human impulse to forego the pleasure of feasting on a pygmy (since none were likely to be handy before daybreak) I had decided to try this stream for clams or fish. There must be something, I thought, or the pygmies wouldn't have been down here with nets. But my inspiration was blasted by my discovery. My shoulders had shrunken into slight lumps where my cylindrical body enlarged below my neck. All traces of the appendages had disappeared.

Hunting clams or fish without the aid of hands wasn't going to be easy. My serpent's instinct urged me not to plow through the water with my mouth open.

I tried to think of a way out. I was too hungry to think: I needed a pygmy. I was too weak and sore to start the journey back to the surface, two or three miles overhead. I wondered. . . . Didn't any pygmies ever get lost on their way home from a celebration and tumble into this place by mistake? I didn't wish them any ill luck, and still—

The thought heartened me and I began to swim, slowly, painfully, up the stream. I feared that I might be doomed to spend much time down here, and if so I had just as well explore the whole weird river.

Curious, the sensations that accompanied me on that long night. A few minutes of moonlight filtered all the way down to my bright eyes and gave them a frightening yellow glow in the water's reflection. After the moonlight, darkness. Cloudy darkness, and rain. Thin drops that splashed over the length of me as I raised one loop after another of my rope-like body to the surface. The sky, again; again the moon. Again, that mystifying feeling that someone else was present.

"Maybe it's one of those pygmies I ate," I said aloud. I listened, unmoving, trying to determine whether my words had been answered with an ever so delicate sound—the amused puff of breath from some listener back there in the blackness.

I swam faster. I stopped suddenly and allowed the waters to swirl around me. I listened. I *did* hear the sounds of breathing—no, *whispering!*

IT WAS almost over me. Now it was retreating. I waited, and it was gone. I was tempted to follow. A human whisper was a promise of food for a hungry serpent. But I was puzzled as to how any follower could be hovering *over* me.

My plan formed slowly. It would depend upon finding a sharp turn in the river to make sure that I would not give myself away.

I plowed ahead, increasing my speed. The narrow line of night sky, high above me, was darkening again. In a few moments I came to a sharp turn that would close away any sights momentarily from my pursuer. Swishing through the turn, I applied my muscled coils to the wall and climbed up.

Good luck—I slipped out of the water almost silently, so there was no warning splash! Now—careful!

I bridged between the walls less than twenty feet above the stream's surface. The humps that would have been my shoulders rested against one side, and the coil of my belly braced solid against the other. Thus, my head and neck were free to move back and forth between the walls.

In a moment it came—a length of rope with a weight on the lower end. *I knew it!* My pursuer—or rather, *pursuers*—hung from a rope that was being moved by some guiding force two or three miles up, at the top of the crevasse.

The rope rubbed against my unseen

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body. The occupants of the swing at the lower end coasted to a stop and dangled like an uncertain pendulum.

"What's happened?" one of them whispered.

"We've caught on something," said the other. "We'd better get loose, too, or he'll get away. He was swimming fast."

"Are you sure it was *he?* It might be the girl, you know."

"If he turned serpent, it's more likely to be a man. Here, let's kick the wall together and maybe we'll jar loose. By George, I can see something right above us. Looks like it bridges all the way across. Where's the light?"

"We don't dare show a light," said the first voice. "That beast wouldn't know whether we were a friend or foe, and what's more, he wouldn't care."

That was when I broke my long silence with an ugly hissing question.

"Whicccch are you?"

I felt the jerk of the rope as it scraped past an injured spot on my body and instantly pulled away from me. The two men must have had close contact with their guides high overhead. Whatever their signal system, they swung back from me before I could dart forward with my head. They swung back and up, without stopping for a word of argument.

"What's the hurry?" I hissed.

One of them answered, "Who are you?"

I didn't know. The girl had called me Bob, and the name had begun to ring pleasantly. I had caught the impression that it was all right to be Bob, as far as she was concerned, but that it might not be so good to be anyone else. I wondered.

"Bring me some food," I called.

"Who *are* you?" the voice returned.

"How do *I* know?" I said. "I'm too hungry to know anything."

There was a short whispered consultation. Should they flash the light on or shouldn't they? Would the monster snap at them or would he give them a chance? The wisps of conversation were reassuring, and I began to know that these two *meant* to be friends, if I would give them a chance.

"Are you *Bob?"* one of them asked presently.

"Who is *Bob?"* I asked.

THEY put their heads together again. If I didn't know who Bob was, maybe I wasn't one of the party they were seeking after all. Maybe I hadn't come to the space island recently—maybe I was an old-timer here who had simply kept myself well hidden until yesterday when I had been lured to the surface by the sight of that two-headed cat-monster.

It was all a mystery to me, but I wasn't going to turn away any advantage or miss a chance to eat.

"Pull me up to the surface," I said, "so I can find my dinner." I put considerable hiss in my voice as I added, "Otherwise I'll have to eat what I find down here."

"Meaning what?" one of the voices asked sharply.

"Meaning you. Hssssssh. *You."*

The rustle from the swing was the sound of two men making ready for trouble with ray pistols.

"All right, fellow," one of them said. "Crawl up this way and twine yourself around the rope. We'll take you up to the surface. No false moves, though, or you'll never eat another dinner."

I obeyed. My long body swished quietly upward between the walls and I crossed over to the rope. A moon slipped into sight, high above, and the two men below me must have had a fair view of me as I corkscrewed upward. My sore belly was put to a cruel test,

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trying to hold a grip on a rope no bigger around than your arm, but presently I was on and I gave them the signal to take me up easy. Up we went.

A few minutes later I slithered over the edge of the crevasse once more, and mentally I vowed I would never seek those lower regions again. I was beginning to have some purposes of my own.

There was first of all that big purpose, and all the way up through the dark walls I had tried my best to recall what it was. Someone I must find? That was getting close, I thought.

Someone to find—the only someone I knew up here was the beautiful girl in the pool. Well, there was the one purpose that I could swear to. I wanted to know whether she was still there, and who she was, and where I had known her before.

"Bob," she had called me. If any words ever echoed in a snake's ears, hers were the words. If any serpent ever felt obliged to go back to a beautiful woman and find out why she had dared to trust him as far as that girl had trusted me, I was that serpent.

And so, out of these purposes, half defined, and half foggy, I acted with the slyness of a snake.

I could see the outline of a small plane on the ground. In the light of the various moons, I could see that its door was open. Did I dare?

The rope was still rising, being wound upward into a blimp that hovered darkly over the crevasse. The men had just reached the top. Now they would expect to take me in charge, using their pistols to command me.

"This way, you. If you want that dinner—"

I didn't listen. Something from my half forgotten memories told me that I knew how to handle a plane, and the door was open. It was a perfect set-up if I could crawl in before the guns started heading me off with red fire.

Swissssh. Zippp! I shot along over the cool grass and I ploughed right into the plane's entrance.

There, so far so good. I pushed my nose against a lever that locked me in. The men were coming, all right. The lines of red fire were *zeego* shots, the same as the pygmies had used. But they were outside and I was safe within, crawling across the floor to the controls.

Could I, with my serpent's nose, my teeth, my hammer-like head, my agile neck—could I get away with it? In another moment I would know.

If it worked, then I would have the freedom to see what this strange land was all about. And first of all I would find that girl, if they hadn't taken her already.

The controls were locked!

Not a thing responded to my touch. Not a switch—

But suddenly, as I was trying one gadget after another, the lights went on—surely not from anything I had done!

"There," came a voice through the speaker, "I guess we're ready to take him with us." Those were voices from the blimp, coming in on the intercom.

"Is he in?" another voice said.

"He crawled right in without any coaxing," said one of the voices that had come up from the depths with me. "That's enough to prove that he *is* Bob. Look, he's at the controls now. He's our missing pilot, all right. That's another victory, boys. We're getting the party assembled gradually."

So I was Bob, a pilot. All right, if they said so, I'd be agreeable. But I was also a hungry serpent. I wasn't a cooperative animal. I was sly and vicious, and all I wanted was to look out for myself. If they thought they were

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going to fly me somewhere as a prisoner, they had another think coming. I coiled around and crawled back to the door and nosed against the lever.

It wouldn't open.

The plane was moving through the blackness. Yes, it was rising. They were flying it by remote control, and I was on my way *somewhere,* whether I liked it or not.

CHAPTER VI

NO DOUBT about it, they had set a neat trap for me. And here I was thinking that I was the sly one. They may have had the advantage of human looks, but I'm darned if they hadn't out-serpented the serpent.

We went toward the pink dawn and landed in the early morning twilight on a shelf of concrete in the upper level of a valley between two huge shoulders of mountain. Here was the stronghold from which I had seen the planes come, not so many hours ago, after the blow-up of a falling space ship.

My plane landed and came to a stop in front of a magnificent arched entrance. The other planes and the blimp closed in around me, and a ground crew of blue-and-orange men came out to take over.

The door of my plane was not opened until a glass-and-metal cage was set up for me.

I crawled in without any undue coaxing. Their trickery was still working. They had put a pygmy in the far corner of the cage. I *thought* it was a pygmy. But when my jaws clamped over it I found that it was a wax imitation. I spat it out and recoiled to strike back at someone, I didn't care whom. However, the door of my cage had already slid shut and I was caught.

If I had been an honored ambassador from the earth, extending good will and a promise of interplanetary trade to this planet, I'm sure my hosts would have found it in their power to feed me without any undue delay. And I would have eaten, and a friendship would have been sealed then and there, by virtue of the universal law of brotherhood that springs from a full stomach.

But I was a serpent in a cage, and neither my human voice nor the growlings of my lank intestines could prod my caretakers to move any faster than they wished to do.

"Is he ready for the experiment?" I heard someone ask.

"Better take him back into the Z Lab," came the answer.

Not bad looking scientists, I thought to myself. Plump and well-fed and sufficiently healthy to keep a hungry serpent nourished for a week. What other attributes these men may have had didn't interest me much at the time. I had caught a fleeting glimpse of the arched doorway, a noble structure ornamented with polished brass, large enough for planes to enter. Of the three openings under the arch, I was taken through the one that served the automotive traffic. Two trucks spun past me on their way out to one of the mountain highways, and I saw that they were driven *by pygmies!*

"This isn't going to be so pleasant," I told myself. "Now how many of those fellows will I have to account for when they bring me up before the judge?"

I was counting back over my indiscretions, shall we say, when the tunneled driveway opened into a lighted room. They wheeled me past a row of elevators, on through a lobby of automotive vehicles, and at last through a door of three square green-metal panels marked *Laboratory Z.*

The room would have been perfectly dark if someone hadn't been meddling

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with a lightning machine. As soon as the Lab door closed behind me, the lightning had me. I mean, it would have captured anyone's attention the first time. Dark-dark-dark-*flash!* Dark-dark-dark-*flash!*

After the first fifteen purplish-white flashes you began to think you'd caught the rhythm and could tell when the next flash was coming. But that was an illusion. *Flash-flash-flash!* All at once they were coming fast, and you had a premonition that they were going to close in on you and electrocute you. You couldn't tell exactly where they were coming from. But all at once you saw the door of your cage fly open, and no one was standing there with guns, so it was your chance.

I flashed around and darted out through the opening. My flying tail struck the rear wall as I turned, only to add a hard push to my sudden effort to slither out while there was a chance.

Wouldn't I ever learn?

It was nothing more than a trick, of course.

I REALIZED it the moment the last of my forty-foot body found the cool concrete floor. The very next flash showed a derrick-like arm swinging down from the ceiling. One glimpse—the resemblance was unmistakable—it was a package of sulphur-colored powders, the same as those that had descended on the girl in the pool.

Floooof!

On the instant the blackness of the room gave way to what seemed a luminous dust storm. My serpent-like form writhed and whipped and scraped and fought. The deluge was over me. I coughed and choked with wild unspeakable tortures.

It was over. The air was clearing, and the steam that had stung deep in my lungs was melting away. Bars of lights came on around the room, and the first thing I saw was my own form in a huge mirror.

I moved, half crawling and half *walking*, toward the mirror.

If you can imagine the classical facade of an old fashioned colonial home, with two pairs of fifty-foot columns standing white and solid on either side of the entrance, that's the sort of frame I now approached. It was the highest mirror I ever saw. A full sized giraffe could have used it to advantage and still had room to spare.

I move up the six wide concrete steps with considerable pride in my bearing. You see, I was watching myself in that mirror, fully aware that something had transformed me. *I had two arms once more, and also a good pair of human legs.*

The arms, somewhat to my dismay, were about six feet long—long enough that I had at once begun to use them for front legs. My snake-like body was still all there, from my scaled face and sly greenish-yellow eyes all the way down to my brightly colored tail. But I had legs! I was walking as well as crawling.

"How do you like it?"

The voice came out of a speaker in the wall.

"How did you do it?" I replied. I looked around to see who was conversing with me, and I spied them—three men in a plexiglass pill-box on the opposite wall.

"Come over this way so we can see you," one of the men said. "Do you remember who you are?"

"Of course," I said. "I'm Bob Garrison, a registered space ship pilot. I came to this space island on an errand—"

I checked myself. After all, it was none of their concern, so far as I knew. Just now I was whirling with more

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thoughts than I could hold, but it wouldn't do to spill any of the confidential ones. I was not too sure, after all, that I was among friends.

"I'm Bob Garrison," I repeated.

"Walk around the room, Bob Garrison," came the order.

I didn't mind obeying. It paid to know what one's body would and would not do, and if this was it—well, I needed a bit of exercise to get my balance.

All at once the hunger pangs shot through me, and I stopped, immediately below the platform where the three men were perched and looked up at them. Then the dreadful fact of my pygmy dinners came back with a new surge of remorseful conscience. That was awful. It was hideous. It was terrifying, and my serpent blood ran cold at the thought.

There I was, however, caught between the human impulse to recover my civilized feelings and my bestial instincts to leap up at the platform and devour one of those men.

I LEAPED. I leaped and struck at the plexiglass enclosure, and almost hit it.

"Good action," one of the men mumbled through the speaker. "I can't recall that we've ever had such a specimen as that before."

"I don't understand," another scientist replied, "why he shouldn't have transformed more completely into his original stage. He seems to have regained the human memory, all right. And we're not going to have any trouble bringing his arms back to normal. But he's taken a pretty deep shock, somehow, to have that serpent's body fixed upon him so stubbornly. How large a dose of powders did we apply?"

Their discussion went on along these lines. The girl, they mentioned, had come back to normal with only half as strong an explosion as they had given me. But someone protested that she had already been partially reconverted by means of a shock from *zeego* gunfire.

"Why don't we try the *zeego* fire on this one, then?"

That matter was worth a few minutes' earnest discussion, and two or three times I was sure they would decide to do it. (Once, not so many hours ago, I had captured three *zeego* guns of my own, I recalled, and had tried to find a pygmy to use them on, but in the end my appetite had always won over my scientific ambitions.) They eventually suspended their discussion. The boss had better be consulted before they did anything more to me.

"He's a pretty valuable specimen, just as he stands," said the chief spokesman. "We might ruin him with *zeego* fire. I have a hunch—"

He paused as if perhaps he should hold back his confidences, but the other two consultants were already guessing his thought.

"Yes, gentlemen, I have a hunch that Dr. Hunt will prefer to dissect this specimen as he now stands. An undamaged skeleton of this sort will give us one of the finest studies in the laboratory."

So that was it! I was to be Dr. Hunt's undamaged skeleton, was I? That was too much.

And to think that I was the man who had come to this ghastly outpost of space on a secret mission, if you please —*to rescue the lost scientist, Dr. Emerson Hunt.*

I leaped and struck the underside of the transparent enclosure so hard that the floor cracked, and a brace tore loose from its wall mooring. The three gentlemen must have decided to take their conference elsewhere. They made a quick exit and locked the wall door behind them.

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CHAPTER VII

I SHALL be everlastingly thankful to the caretaker who fed me before my visit with Flora Hessel. I was ravenous, and I simply couldn't have maintained any outward appearance of civilized serpenthood if they hadn't fed me.

The cage was around me again. I didn't mind that. It was just the protection I needed while I did some tall thinking. Flora Hessel, bless her heart, came to me and helped me think. With her help, it all seemed worthwhile.

"We were both warned against coming to this outpost in the first place," she said.

I nodded. I was thinking how beautiful a person she was, even dressed in one of the workmen's uniforms—a rough one-piece suit of blue and orange and a liberal sprinkling of grease spots. Her dark hair was loosely combed, falling free over one shoulder. Her bare legs and arms were lithe and graceful as she settled herself comfortably in the chair which a caretaker provided for her outside my cage.

"I remember what you said, Bob," she smiled, "when they warned you against coming. You said you had your own good reason for coming—something more than hiring out as their pilot, I was sure. But you never told me."

"No, I've never told anyone," I said cautiously. The fact was that I had been on the verge of telling her more than once during our long hours of flight together. But Ernest Marsch had done his very best to keep us from becoming acquainted. Ernest Marsch had hired each of us for our specialized jobs, and he had intended that we should keep our minds on our work.

"We have heard tales of these strange transformations before we came," Flora went on, looking dreamily off into space. "don't know about you, but I simply didn't believe they could happen."

"I didn't quite realize," I admitted. "Still, that was the very earliest report that ever came from this land—you know—after the first wave of settlers from the earth were shipped off Mars—"

It could be found in any modern history, even though each historian was careful to word his account in such a way that the story could be taken as a legend rather than fact. The first wave of American and English settlers on the earth colonies of Mars had gone through the bitter ordeal of becoming adjusted to new climatic and gravitational conditions, and the awful experience had taken its toll. Fifty years after the first wave of settlers, the second wave had come to Mars in great numbers. They came equipped with better means of setting up conditions congenial to their own needs, and they made a healthy go of it.

But the second group of Martian settlers simply couldn't endure the first! That was the original tragedy—and this was the fact that every writer of history deplored. The first group had become so changed and twisted in their human nature—shrunken in mind and body and spirit, and animal-like in their tastes—that in a sudden act of hysteria the second group had loaded up hundreds of the first group on derelict space ships and simply rocketed them *out of the solar system!*

Beyond the solar system, they had fallen to this mysterious space island, where the forces of gravitation had been found to be much like those of the earth. The drifting planet's inner heat provided conditions suitable for life, and there was life here—life in innumerable forms. Since much of the interplanetary driftwood, living and otherwise, from the solar system and three other systems, found its way to this particu-

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lar catchall in the sky, it was not surprising that there would be many forms of life here.

But, according to the fanciful legend which the historians handled with great caution, those varying forms of life were the results of *transformations* that occurred as soon as the creatures from other planets began to eat the food and drink the water which this space island provided.

And according to the legend, the first outcasts from the earth colony on Mars were still living here—not their descendants, but the original members of the first group. If this were true, they must be men and women more than two hundred years of age—or *were* they men and women?

Or were they *beasts* who roamed the mountains of Space Island?

THE historians could only cite the legend and promise that in time the scientists would have more answers.

But scientists were not too eager to come, considering the odds that a personal tragedy of some sort would strike them before they had a chance to set up a laboratory. As few persons on the earth realized, Dr. Hunt had come, but not of his own accord. There had been a bit of smooth interplanetary gangsterism back of his sudden disappearance from the well-known Emerson Laboratories.

All of this background came welling up into my thoughts while I talked with Flora Hessel from my glass and metal cage. The recent liberation from the awful serpent-thoughts gave me a flare of new hope that I might still be on the trail of my original purpose.

"I am going to confide in you," I said quietly, trying my best to keep the hiss out of my voice. "But first, you must tell me something. How did you know, when you first saw me as a serpent, that I might be Bob? Why didn't you guess me to be Ernest Marsch. Or Pete Hogan? Or one of the others?"

"Don't you know?"

"There were ten of us on board," I said, "and the explosion that struck us as we were coming in must have either killed or transformed all of us into something unrecognizable. I certainly didn't recognize you when you were in your cat-monster body. Not until you began to reduce into human form. And even then my mind was too bleary to remember who you were. I only knew that I felt friendly toward you."

"That was it," said Flora. "It was your manner—your friendliness and your courage. You remember you rushed after those little gunmen the minute they started shooting. Pete Hogan wouldn't have done that."

"But Ernest Marsch might have. After all, he's the one who employed you to come up here and tame some of his obstreperous workers. He wouldn't want to see you shot down after investing in you."

She smiled at the corners of her eyes. "You're right. If they'd killed me, *he'd* have shaken the gold out of my teeth to line his pocketbook."

"But you knew that I was Bob, not Ernest Marsch? Are you sure I'm *not* Marsch?"

"You were quite considerate of me while I was cornered in that cavern pool," she said. "For a snake, you used remarkably nice manners. Marsch wouldn't have been that decent even at his human best, you know."

I must admit that her words pleased me, and I felt that I was better acquainted with her than I had been at any time during the trip. Marsch had tried to drive a wedge between the two of us from the start. He had warned me that she was a dangerous person—

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that she had once come very nearly being a gangster's moll—that she had been mixed up in a gang war that had resulted in five killings one dark night on the west side. But I knew that whatever her past had been, she had later gained an enviable reputation in her social service work with the tough, homeless men on the west side. It was said that she could walk into a mob of quarreling, angry men and have them singing hymns within twenty minutes!

That was why Ernest Marsch had hired her for this job, as I had learned from their conversations on the ship. He was lining this planet up for some high-powered commercial venture, and he wanted the inhabitants—the *human* inhabitants—to be at least docile enough that they wouldn't obstruct the march of progress.

HER task wasn't going to be any snap, juding from what I had seen of those devilish pygmies. Moreover, if there were many freaks like me, half animal and half human, little Miss Hessel was going to have a big handful of trouble.

"Do they consider you a prisoner here?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she looked wistfully at the window and the ridge of green mountains beyond. "They seem to think they're going to find Ernest Marsch somewhere, though it beats me how they can find any trace of lost persons in such a big empty world."

"And if they find Marsch—?"

"Well, I've told them I'm bound to work for him. I signed the contract and took out life insurance before I boarded."

"I wonder what *he* turned into."

"It's all theory," she said, "but one of the men was saying they believe a person's mood or humor at the time he struck the planet's explosive atmosphere is the thing that determines his change." Then she laughed. "No, it *can't* be that. You couldn't have been in the mood of a serpent."

"Are you sure?" I thought the matter over privately. I had certainly been spying on Ernest Marsch right up toward the moment of coming in on a landing, and I had been watching him as suspiciously as any snake. "But *you* couldn't have been a two-headed feline."

She was amused. "I don't know. When I try to remember that last moment before we exploded, all I can recall is that I was very curious—as curious as any cat, I'll bet—and I was trying to watch you and Ernest Marsch at the same time—trying not to displease either of you, though I felt sure that you were almost at swords' points—"

"Ye gods," I said. "This theory is getting stickier every minute. Maybe you *were* being a two-headed feline." Then, "If there's anything to it, they'll never find Marsch. It isn't easy to locate a worm, you know."

"It shouldn't be so hard to pick up a wolf," she said, giving me a quick look. "And I don't mean a harmless wolf either. If it hadn't been for your help on the trip, I think I might have forgot my good manners and shot Ernest Marsch through the heart."

"Really?"

"I didn't sign up to be his girl friend, you know. That little pistol of mine has been a friend in need more than once."

Then her edged voice softened and she looked at me sympathetically. "We'll have to get you out of this awful shape. They've made a good start, anyway, getting your brain back in order. But it's just a start. Are they going to find a way? Is that the confidence you wanted to give me?"

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"The confidence is this," I said. "I've just learned that this laboratory is the property of Dr. Hunt."

"Emerson Hunt? The one who was kidnapped from the earth?"

"I think so. I'm almost sure. It all points that way—these advanced experiments and all. You know what a reputation he had."

"And he's here—alive?"

"Yes. I'm on his trail."

"You mean—?"

"That that's my secret mission. I've come here to find him. Confidentially, an association of scientists has backed me in my plan to try to rescue him. You can realize how much it will mean to the earth—to the whole solar system—if he can be found and taken back."

"Oh!" Flora was gasping. "Oh, what a miracle that *would* be! It *would!* It would be a *miracle* for the whole world!"

"If not a miracle, at least a blessing."

"Of course!" She was rather too excited over the idea to know what she was saying, and I quieted her gently to make sure our conversation wouldn't be overheard by any of the guards. She was at once so enthusiastic that she was ready to break her contract with Marsch simply to help me. "No *wonder* you were always talking about some big purpose. How did you know he would be here?"

There was much that I couldn't tell her as yet. But the one fearful fact had to be told at once.

"Flora, listen to me carefully. I'm going to need all the help I can get, but we're going to be working against this whole weird world. I can tell that already—and you can too. Don't you see that they're thriving here in this strange scientific fortress on the genius of Dr. Hunt? Nobody here is going to let him get away if they can help it. Worst of all, I'm already doubting whether he'll *want* to get away."

"But *why?* If he has a sure chance to get back to the earth, *why*—"

"Because people change when they come to this land. Dr. Hunt has probably changed too."

"But if you talk to him—if you explain—"

I laughed rather mockingly at her extreme innocence. "Maybe *you* can talk to him, but not I."

"Why not?"

"Do you forget that I'm still a serpent? Not an ordinary serpent, but a serpent with four legs and a human mind. To a scientist with the advanced ideas of Dr. Hunt, I'll be something to be analyzed and observed, not listened to."

"Oh!"

"Eventually, they'll dissect me and see how I'm put together. I've already heard some of the consulting scientists mention that Dr. Hunt will be eager to get my skeleton for his permanent collection."

Six guards marched in, then, and our visit came to an end abruptly when they announced that Dr. Hunt was waiting to see me. Flora stood back of her chair, watching speechless as they wheeled me away in my cage.

CHAPTER VIII

I HAVE had the common sensation of chills running down my spine many times in normal life, but I must say that I never knew any feeling like this before. When one's spine is fully forty feet long, and a series of chills chases through from head to tail, I'm telling you it's wild. Zing—zing—zing—before one chill gets well started, another's on the way.

There was far more to this mountain laboratory than I had guessed, at first sight. I hadn't realized that Z Lab

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could mean just that—the last unit in a series named after the entire alphabet. But after we had moved past six or eight units, each bearing a different letter, I began to get a new appreciation of the extent of this place.

I was on my way to H laboratory. This had possibly become Dr. Hunt's favorite because it bore his initial.

H Laboratory opened to me automatically. The grilled metal doorway slid back into the wall, and a second door—a checkerboard of silver and gold—parted in the middle and folded backward in two wings.

"No talking, now," the guards warned me. I had almost forgotten that they were with me, I was so intent upon the details of all this laboratory grandeur.

"No talking," I repeated, rather insolently.

"And no undue crawling or twitching," one of the guards added.

"As if I had room to crawl in this cage," I replied.

"Quiet!" he snapped.

"I can't even twitch," I added. The serpent instinct was working on me. I was looking for ways to be annoying. "Can I breathe?"

"All right, breathe, but stop talking."

"Hisssss-hisssss!"

"Quiet."

"I'm just breathing," I said. "Can I help it if I've got a cold?"

The six guards stopped me in the middle of the doorway and put their heads together. Then I knew I had gone too far. The first thing I knew they'd start exploding more yellow powders over my head and I'd lose what little freedom I'd gained.

One of them stalked into a small supply room which we had just passed and returned, a moment later, bearing something that resembled a long-nosed oil can, but must have been some sort of high-powered hypodermic needle.

I was tempted to pull some fancy whip act and lash the fellow with my tail before he could give me the works. Something told me to take it easy—there might be worse things in store if I didn't at least *pretend* to cooperate. They gave me the shot.

The needle caught me about twelve feet from the tapered end of my body. One sharp ice-cold jab! All of those chills that had run down my long spine a few minutes before came chasing up again.

Chills and dizziness and then—ah! what a sensation of peace. I began to feel tame. Agreeable. Downright happy. All at once I wanted to be the nicest, kindliest serpent that ever went visiting in a laboratory.

"That ought to do it," one of the guards said.

I turned, touched the brow of my scaled face with my fingers and tried to smile.

"Thank you, gentlemen, I feel much better. What can I do to return the favor?"

"He's okay," the guards agreed, and proceeded to wheel me into Laboratory H.

I was pleasantly treated to the beauties and mysteries of the most impressive laboratory equipment I had ever seen. The huge glass tubes, standing in clusters above the tables, some of them twenty-five or thirty feet tall, were illuminated by a battery of colored lights, lavender, light green, purple, deep violet. Their gleaming stems were like frozen music. In one corner of the six-cornered room, a bright orange blur of motion indicated that a governor was spinning silently over a pyramid of shining machinery. One couldn't hear the churning of liquids in the scores of transparent containers which were built into the different levels of the mysteri-

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ous pyramid; but the orange blur cast its light over the whole series with each revolution. Again, a riot of colors hinted of a master-mind's secrets in blending the molecules of many elements. Who could know what new and rare combinations might come into existence through these experiments?

OUT of the dazzle I detected one detail which struck me as something not to be forgotten. That yellowish-white powder. At one side of the mixing pyramid I discovered it, sifting down slowly, like sand through an hour glass. Was this not the same sulphur-like substance that had been exploded over my head? And earlier, dumped over the pool where Flora Hessel was hiding?

If so, I thought, here was the source of these scientists' seeming magic.

The nice, kindly, agreeable feeling within me shuddered for just an instant. The serpent slyness was still there, under the surface. *If I could steal some of that powder, what might I do for myself? Was this my way back to my human state?*

"The doctor will be in right away," one of the white-uniformed men said. "Is our patient ready to be examined?"

"With pleasure," I said.

The white-uniformed man shot a quick, suspicious look at me.

"It's all right, Dr. Winston," a guard said. "We just gave him a shot of sixty-eight-J-sixty-nine."

Dr. Winston nodded. "Enough to put him to sleep?"

This wasn't so easily answered. Dr. Winston checked the slip which the guard showed him, and calculated mentally the quantity of the drug as compared with my probable blood content. They weren't too sure of their answers, for they hadn't had any specimen like me before.

"We'll see," Dr. Winston said, nodding again. Then he dismissed them, and I was left alone with him and this marvelous laboratory.

So they thought I would go to sleep, did they? Not if I could help it. Still, it was an idea.

I spoke drowsily, "Nice place you have here, friend." I opened my jaws slowly and yawned and let my eyes go half closed. "Nice place—ho-humm. Quiet . . . Restful."

He was watching me out of one corner of his eye. I seemed to be dropping off into a peaceful slumber.

He went to the telephone.

"Dr. Hunt? . . . The four-legged serpent is ready. . . . Obstreperous? Far from it. The attendants gave him a shot of sixty-eight-J-sixty-nine. He's sleeping."

I allowed my arms to fold on the floor of my cage, so that my head and neck sank to the level of my belly. It wasn't a very proud posture—and I must admit it wasn't easy to allow myself to slump into such a dejected-looking heap of flesh—especially in the presence of a fine, kingly looking person like Dr. Winston. He would have looked well in any convention of athletes—broad-shouldered, well-shaped hands, keen grey eyes, and a vigorous head of fine brown hair. He stood with excellent posture, with just enough swagger and toss to his head that it made you think his brain must weigh considerably more than the average man's.

I wondered whether Dr. Hunt could present as perfect an appearance. About all I had remembered of Hunt's picture was the striking black mustache and the sharp-pointed short black beard.

"Hisssssss-hisssssss-hisssss . . ."

My hissing breaths were barely audible. I was sure that I had convinced Dr. Winston. Now if Dr. Hunt would

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just fall for my gag, I would have a chance to know what these men of knowledge meant to do with me.

Dr. Winston turned at the sound of a slight squeak-squeak-squeak from what might be considered the rear door of Laboratory H. It was the boss himself, rolling in in his luxurious chair.

Anyone would have known at a glance that here was the top man. Now that I saw him again, his pictures came back to me—that extremely potent magnetic quality that strikes out at you from some faces—he had it more than any person I had ever seen.

There was something about him that I couldn't quite clarify in my reptilian brain. I ignored the troubling thought and tried hard to watch him.

He rolled to a position within ten feet of my cage front, and I drank him in, mentally, through the half-slits of my sleeping eyes.

He hadn't looked up at me yet, I thought. The squeak of his chair annoyed me. He reached for the telephone that was a part of his rolling equipment, and barked an order to be relayed to some service department.

His physical peculiarity had struck me rather incidentally at first, but now I saw what it was. *He had four arms.*

He put down the phone at the same time he mopped the perspiration off his wide brow—at the same time he touched a chair control that moved him a little closer—at the same time his fourth and final hand was reaching into a pocket for another pair of eye-glasses.

The rolling chair had been so well designed to accommodate his four-armed body that one wasn't disturbed by the slightly spidery effect—as long as he was sitting.

WHEN he arose and began to walk around me I was more sensitive to his freakish profusion of appendages. It was all I could do to keep from opening my eyes wide. I was blinking, in spite of myself, but he and Dr. Winston were busy sizing up my length.

"We'll have to get some measurements, first thing, said Dr. Hunt. "I'd like to start dissecting as soon as possible."

"You mean within a few hours?" Winston asked. "It will take a few hours to sharpen the knives."

"You understand, of course, why I'm relying upon an early dissection."

Dr. Winston understood, and the two of them discussed it in just enough detail that I caught the drift. It was Dr. Hunt's hope that they might be able to produce more specimens like me. He believed that an early examination of the tissues of my body would show traces of the transformation from old to new. These would serve as guides for repeating the experiment.

They talked quietly.

That drugging they'd given me *was* making me sleepy, all right. But I held on. I wanted to know how soon they intended to start making pork chops of me——or should I say dragon chops?

The repair man came in just then, and they dropped their talk of me in favor of Dr. Hunt's rolling chair.

"Just an oiling job?" the repair man asked. "I'll have it back in five minutes."

Dr. Hunt pointed to the brown and blue checkered upholstery, demonstrating its worn places with his four hands. He said there should be a new upholstery job some time soon.

The repair man rolled the chair out the front entrance, and the two doctors returned to me.

"His eyes flickered," said Dr. Winston. "I believe he's awake."

"They tell me he talks," said Dr. Hunt. "Let's have a few words out of him."

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Winston turned to me. "Say something."

"Hisssss!" I said.

"Come, come. You can do better than that."

"Hisss. Hisss. Why should I talk if you're going to pick my bones clean and turn me into a laboratory skeleton?"

All four of Dr. Hunt's elbows bumped backward and his sharp little beard jumped to an impertinent angle.

"I thought you said that they gave him a shot of sixty-eight-J-sixty-nine."

"They did," said Dr. Winston. "He was highly agreeable a few minutes ago."

"I'm highly agreeable *now*," I said casually, rising to a more comfortable position, and straightening my front legs beneath my scaled shoulders. "If you want to start cutting me up right away, I'll help you *sharpen the knives*."

"Oh, you will.—You *are* being agreeable, aren't you," said Dr. Hunt.

"These front legs of mine are pretty handy," I went on. "I've a good pair of hands on them, as you can see. So I'll help you dissect. *I* can begin cutting off cross-sections of my tail, if you like—"

"The drug's gone to his head," said Winston. "We'd better give him something else."

Dr. Hunt was eyeing me closely, not saying a word. I knew that my "cutting" remarks had disturbed him. I had gotten under his skin.

"Why don't you boys get *smart?*" I said, following up my advantage.

"Meaning what?" said Winston.

"Meaning that you're limping along with *old-fashioned methods* in this broken-down lab." I said it with all the conviction I could muster, and it was driving home. Dr. Hunt's twenty fingers began to twitch uneasily. I went on digging. "This broken-down lab might be good enough for Space Island, but it wouldn't be a good give-away back on the earth, unless you could find some scientist who is a sucker for antiques."

Dr. Hunt reddened a trifle, and his two right hands stroked through his ruffled black hair.

"What equipment do they have on the earth," he asked bluntly, "that excels my best?"

"They have a multiple X-ray attached to a plastic machine, so that they could turn out a perfect copy of my skeleton, in plastic, without ever touching a knife blade to my skin."

The two doctors exchanged glances.

"The drug has gone to his head," Winston repeated. "I'll get something stronger."

CHAPTER IX

I'LL never know whether their sixty-eight-J-sixty-nine accounted for my actions, two minutes later, when the *zeego* guns began to flash all over the place.

They say that some men will rise to the greatest heights of bravery, or congeniality, or oratory under the influence of certain beverages, and afterward they'll wonder whether the achievement was their own or whether it came out of the bottle. That's how it was with me, two minutes later when the surprise attack struck Laboratory H.

It was those damned pygmies! Whoever they were, and wherever they had come from, they were suddenly raiding the place with *zeego* guns!

Flash-flash-flash-flash! ! ! !

Red fire blasted through the dark corridor, quick sharp lines of it—back and forth and across. Three bars of it cut through the double doors of Lab H.

Dr. Winston dropped and I thought he had been hit.

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Dr. Hunt spun around, obviously looking for his rolling chair, but it was gone. He strode swiftly across to the nearest laboratory table and seized a telephone. Before he could speak, five of those two-and-a-half foot demons were racing in with their guns blazing.

One of them guarded the door, two of them marched to Dr. Winston, crouched on the floor holding his arm as if he had been wounded. The other two were running toward Dr. Hunt.

They didn't appear to notice me, probably because I was just a specimen in a cage, lying there inert without showing any signs of knowing what was going on. That's what *they* thought!

I swung my arm down through an opening between bars and smacked my hand against the floor. My cage, resting on rollers, lunged forward. Another touch of my hand sent me coasting into the path of the two pygmies who were going for Dr. Hunt.

They were moving fast, but so was I.

The red fire splashed over the glass sides of my prison. I caught a bit of the spray in my back. It struck with the sharpness of a hundred needles. My coiled body snapped like a spring, and my shoulder crashed into the bars. I drew back, saw the opening I had made, and plunged through.

"Look out! The monster! *Look out!*" one pygmy squealed.

"*Monster, huh?*" I snarled back as if that word had been just one insult too many. I didn't heed their gunfire, though it was needling through my scaled protection. I dived for the two of them with both arms swinging. I must have struck with pretty fair force. One of them sailed clear across the room and crashed into a stack of glass tubes, while his gun flipped into the air like something out of a catapult. The second little fellow simply dropped his weapon and went backing away, holding his hands behind him to keep them from being snapped off.

I pivoted from one arm, then, and whirled my forty-foot length like a whip. That knocked down three of them. A bit of carelessness on my part, I'm afraid, in the final flash of my tail. Dr. Winston had just come to his feet, and I caught him, too. So that everyone was on the floor except Dr. Hunt and the pygmy who had stayed to guard the door. I went for the guard. The pygmy at the door, I mean. He went for the corridor.

The first part of the pygmy attack ended then and there, as far as I was concerned. For Dr. Hunt had touched a switch, and the inner door of Laboratory H closed.

Clang! That was the outer door.

So there were seven of us, all locked in securely—and for a moment it was a toss-up as to who would be masters and who would be prisoners. Four pygmies—their brown little bodies adorned with nothing but red loin cloths; two doctors—probably the smartest on all of Space Island; and one serpent—a four-legged monstrosity powerful enough to burst out of his cage—and he was out.

I was out, and it seemed to me that I could have scooped all of the other persons in that room into my clutches then and there, and made them submit to my will—or choked them.

I say, it seems to me that I *could* have.

But it wouldn't have worked, and I should have known better than to think that one could defeat a scientist in his own laboratory.

I DID go so far as to gather up three of the four attackers and start toward Dr. Hunt with them—and you may wonder why, when Dr. Hunt was planning to strip the flesh from my

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bones, that I should trouble myself to play the hero in his defense. But you must remember that there was still a certain plan and purpose boring through my mind. I still had the dim hope that I might somehow lift Dr. Hunt out of this weird world and take him back to the earth.

A pretty fancy ambition for a four-legged serpent, you think? All right, I'll admit that I had hitched to a pretty high star. But I wasn't ready to let go.

Dr. Hunt must have flashed the lights off. I stopped in my tracks. The place was utterly dark—no, not quite *that* dark, after all. As soon as my eyes adjusted, I could see the single flooding light—dim, purple light that was almost like a shower bath of luminous purple dust. It was coming down over me, lighting my long six-foot arms, and casting a baleful glow over the three pygmies I held.

I had stopped in my tracks, and now I knew *why* I had stopped. *The flood of purple light had stopped me.*

I couldn't move. I was paralyzed. I was frozen. And that ugly pygmy, over whose waist I had clamped my left hand, was quite as frozen as I. The other two, who I had caught by the feet and who hung upside down from my uplifted right arm, never twitched or flicked an eyebrow.

We were all frozen together by some diabolical paralysis ray. It was a trifle embarrassing. My serpent's jaws were open and my head was inclined toward the object in my left hand. Even in the dim purple light I knew that the two doctors would be able to see, plainly enough, what *might* have happened.

I won't say that it *would* have happened. I only say that the instant the room was plunged in darkness, I must have made a motion as if I were going to eat one of the pygmies—and that was how the paralysis had caught me.

"Are you all right, Dr. Winston?" Dr. Hunt called out.

"I'm here," said Dr. Winston. "That was quick action on your part, Dr. Hunt. You escaped injury, didn't you?"

"Were you knocked down, Dr. Winston? I saw you falling."

"The beast's tail caught me. Have you got the freeze on solid?"

"Solid," said Dr. Hunt. "Another minute and we can put the lights on. We'd better get a report on the rest of the units meanwhile. This attack may be widespread. I've been uneasy for days."

"The Mashas haven't a chance against us, don't worry," said Dr. Winston as stoutly as he could. "This little flare-up can't last. They tried before, you know."

"They've been trying for a century and a half," said Dr. Hunt. "I've studied the records of this planet, and I've found that troubles like these have recurred every ten or fifteen years."

Dr. Hunt got through to his various secretaries on the telephone. He talked fast, at first, until the reassurances calmed him. The attack had come and gone like a quick thundershower. He hung up, satisfied.

He turned on the lights and opened the laboratory doors, all the while reporting to Dr. Winston.

"They've captured fifteen of the troublemakers—none of them identified as our servants. There hasn't been any general uprising among our servants, I'm glad to say. That means that our serums are still working."

"Then the only trouble came from outsiders?" Winston asked.

"Apparently."

"If it had been our servants, they might have reason to make trouble, but

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I can't understand why those outside Mashas who have the whole countryside to live in, and who haven't been in any way enslaved, should take it in their heads to storm our fortress."

"I don't understand it, either," Dr. Hunt admitted slowly. He stroked his sharp black beard thoughtfully. "I wish we had some way of finding out."

They sauntered back in my direction, and then, as if with a single inspiration, they stopped and stared at me. They gazed at the three scared Mashas in my grasp.

"I wonder," Dr. Hunt said slowly.

"I was thinking the same thing," said Dr. Winston. "Maybe we *do* have a way of finding out—a decidedly ingenious way."

Dr. Hunt looked me over carefully, giving particular attention to my open jaws. The *Mashas* were doubly frozen —once from the ray and once from fear.

"I'd hate like sin to let one of the finest specimens we've ever created get away. But I'd risk a lot to know the Mashas from the inside. Yes, I think it might be worth a try," said Dr. Hunt.

CHAPTER X

YOU never saw such tender care exercised upon a serpent. They fed me the most wonderful foods, and gave me the most comfortable bed I could ask for. They treated my wounds with a dozen kinds of salves and oils; they bathed and massaged me and manicured me; they took me out for exercise, allowing me to run along at my own pace, hitched to a ten-ton truck.

It was wonderful while it lasted. I was their favorite pet dog, you might say, and they considered it a privilege to walk me.

The only trouble with the exercise periods was that they always occurred at night, so that I didn't have much chance to study the countryside. That was their precaution. They didn't want the outside pygmies—that is, the Mashas—to know that they were grooming me for a special purpose.

Best of all, they gave me access to an indoor swimming pool where I could thrash around and whip the water to my tail's content.

"Is everything perfectly satisfactory?" the attendants would ask me. "Is the water the right temperature? You *don't* care for a towel, do you? If so, don't hesitate to put in your request."

"Ah—er—I think of just one thing," I said, recalling those first strange hours down in the stream in the bottom of the crevasse. "I have a weakness for blossom-scented air. Could you arrange to have some flowers brought in and placed beside the pool?"

When Flora Hessel came to visit me in my room, and I described all of these luxuries to her, she was not as surprised as I had expected.

"It's no more than you deserve," she said. "After all, you saved the lives of the two most important men in this kingdom."

"I did?"

"Oh, you needn't be so modest about it. Everyone has heard, by this time. That little band of Mashas was all set to take over this fortress from the inside. If they had captured Laboratory H, as they planned, they could have given orders from Dr. Hunt's phones, and that would have done it. There'd have been a thousand Mashas pouring in from all directions before the trick was known."

I studied over that set-up, shaking by head slowly.

"Now I'm not trying to argue for the sake of argument," I said, "and if these rumors are making the rounds, I sup-

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pose there must be some basis for them. But tell me this: how could any pygmy —or Masha, I mean—imitate Dr. Hunt over the phone?"

"People do imitate people, you know."

"But a pygmy imitating Dr. Hunt—that would be like a mouse imitating a lion. Have you heard Dr. Hunt's big solid voice? It's deep, it's throaty, it's full of chesty thunder. Have you heard any of these pygmy servants speak? . . . All right."

Flora came back to her original point that anyway I had saved a couple of lives—important ones, too. So I swelled up my snakely chest with pride. She didn't notice. She was looking out the window at the green ridge of mountains, thinking her private thoughts, and I guessed that my argument about the voices had disturbed her.

"You know," she said presently, "I think you've got an angle. Maybe those pygmies weren't going to use a *pygmy* to imitate Dr. Hunt. Maybe they were going to use someone here at the fortress—one of the guards—one of the doctors—one of Dr. Hunt's secretaries."

"M-m-m." I didn't say it with much conviction. Nevertheless it was a tantalizing thought.

"Maybe this Winston you told me about was all set to step into Dr. Hunt's shoes, using the little people as his army," Flora went on, now looking farther away than ever.

"No, no, it couldn't be that." Refusing to give it a thought, I changed the subject. "It's like Dr. Hunt says, all you have to do is consult the record to see that the Mashas have been bursting out with an attack every ten or fifteen years."

It was natural enough for them to try to regain their lost power, we agreed. The Mashas were the original outcasts from Mars. Their original name, Martians, had degenerated into the word Mashas. Their physical characteristics had been warped and changed from the original man-like stature to the small, wiry, shrunken bodies they now possessed. That was what their first forty or fifty years away from the earth had done for them. Mars had "marshed" them, as the phrase had originally given it; or later, it was said to have "mashed" them.

THE later generations of Martian settlers had first called them, accordingly, not Martians, but Mashas. And it was the new settlers who had more or less brutally exiled them.

Here they were, still alive and still rankling from the mistreatment a hundred and fifty years later.

"One can't help feeling sorry over their plight," Flora said philosophically. "It's all a trick of fate."

"It's been done, and it can't be undone," I said. "For all we know, they may live on another couple centuries —or hell, they may make trouble for a thousand years, who knows. This freakish planet might refuse to let them die."

"Well, they *can* die, you know," said Flora, giving me a quick eye. "You've already accounted for a few of them."

I nodded, a bit shamefaced. Then I told her what had happened at the end of my rescue, when the attack had been made on Laboratory H. I described in all its gory details the statue of the three pygmies caught under my open jaws when the purple paralysis ray shot down on us from the ceiling and froze us in action.

"That little party proved two things to the doctors, as plain as day," I said. "One, my tough scales can withstand a certain amount of *zeego* fire. Two, my

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tough stomach is good for at least a limited quantity of pygmy steak."

"I could have told them that," said Flora.

"Well, there you have it. That's the reason they're treating me to all these luxuries."

"You mean it isn't because you're a hero?"

"Heroes get banquets and medals and speeches. That's because their work is already done. But these boys are grooming me for a *new job*—a big job that's never been done before. They're virtually bribing me to do it well." I told her about it.

"H-m-m-m." Flora Hessel was more than a little disturbed. "Just where does this get you in relation to your own purpose? When you get through exploring the inside of the Masha world as a favor to Dr. Hunt, is he going to pack up and go back to the earth as a favor to you?"

I couldn't answer that in the affirmative and be truthful. And in Flora's presence I didn't feel like being a snake. So I didn't answer.

She walked to the door, and just before she walked away she gave her own answer.

"The first chance you get," she said, "take a walk down the spiral passage beyond Laboratory X and you'll come to the museum of Dr. Hunt's skeletons. You'll find your answer there."

She seemed to be saying, "Walk into the trap, you stupid fool," though she hadn't actually said so.

But there was one thing she had said that deserved a little more explanation, and I called to her sharply.

"Just a minute, there, High-and-Mighty," I said. "How did *you* happen to find your way down into the museum of skeletons? I thought you were a prisoner here. Or are you a first-class tourist? Or are you asking for a job, feeding the skeletons?"

She tossed her dark hair over her shoulders and flashed her dark eyes at me. "I guess it wouldn't make any difference to you if I *did* tell you."

"I've got tough scales. I think I can take it," said.

"All right, you asked for it. I went down there because I had a date with a charming wolf in sheep's clothing."

CHAPTER XI

I MUST have been pretty desperate to take the chance I took the very next night. I *was* desperate. I was boiling with an inner rage that was born not of fear but of jealousy.

"Take me *that* way," I said to the attendant who was examining the hitch at the end of the truck. "Take me back into the mountain trail that curves over the buildings."

The attendant shrugged as if it made no difference to him, so long as I got my exercise. He went up front and crawled in beside the driver. Neither he nor the driver guessed what was in my mind. They were finding me a cooperative pet who could be led to water, and that was all they cared.

I couldn't help wondering whether a pygmy driver would have been as unconcerned. But the authorities had their eye on that item, too. They knew that there might be a leak of information from this mountainside colony to the outside Mashas, and if so, that leak was probably one of the trusted little Masha slaves who, in spite of the doctor's regular doses of serum, contained enough spark to know what was going on.

The pygmy servants were all being watched these days, for this reason. If someone on the inside should be found guilty of helping with the recent at-

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tack, he would no doubt be treated to something pretty severe. More serum, perhaps? Well, you never knew. These scientists were playing a bold game, and they would just as soon try grafting an elephant's head on a two-and-a-half-foot Masha if they thought it would work.

There were a great many things along that line that continually disturbed my thoughts and stole my sleep, and I couldn't help wishing that I could get Dr. Hunt under some special secret-revealing ray long enough to make him expose a few facts.

But this much was beginning to take root in my mind. The Mashas were tougher than the newcomers to this region. Their training period in Mars a century and a half ago had stiffened their resistance to the capricious forces of this planet which turned all manner of men into all manner of freaks. The Mashas had apparently already been cooked to a turn, so to speak, exactly to old Mother Nature's taste. And so they lived on, almost unchanging from year to year.

And still, the serums were able to effect *temporary* differences in their week-to-week behavior. As long as they were well doped, they made excellent slaves—dull, obedient, dependable and, as a rule, non-vicious.

But on the other hand, the men of the earth and other solar planets where earth's space ships had established new branches of earth's peoples—these persons who had come more recently to Space Island—were arriving, in many cases, transformed.

Why? By what agencies? Well, let these brilliant scientists from Dr. Hunt's great laboratories answer such questions if they were able. For my part, I stood as a living proof that such things *did* happen. I had seen the *re*-transformation take place completely in the case of Flora Hessel—partially, in my own case. And there were other evidences . . . .

What of Dr. Hunt's arms? I wondered.

Had this been a trick of accidental transformation? Or *controlled* transformation?

This I knew: he *wanted* those four arms. He had use for all of them, and they did much to increase his efficiency. *If* he had wanted a completely normal body, wouldn't he have applied the yellow powders? Or would that have been taking too great a risk?

What would have happened to him if the *zeego* guns had struck those arms? Would the very shock have acted for a quick change in nature's delicate arrangement of his parts?

It was no wonder that I, the serpent victim of all this ungodly freak factory, was losing sleep trying to understand. There must be some underlying principles, I thought. The very essence of science dwells in principles or laws or some sort of generalizations that can be relied upon. Things happen because a given set of forces *always* makes such things happen.

And yet here I was, the only human serpent—the only four-legged serpent with human hands and a human brain!

In all of Space Island there was not another like me, they believed.

BUT there were *men*—ever so many normal men—like Dr. Winston and the attendants and guards. And there were a few women, at least. Had all of them come through some violent transformation, the same as Flora Hessel?

Ah, *there* was a girl. And as I now ran along beside the truck that was taking me out for exercise, this was at once the most hopeful and the most disturbing thought of all. *Flora!*

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Who was I, a serpent, to try to bring scientific order out of this weird world of confusion? All I really knew, in the final analysis, were the obvious things. I knew Flora—yes.

I knew that there wasn't another person on this planet who was so much a friend to me as Flora Hessel. Of all the brilliant persons who had observed me and questioned me and cared for me, she was the only one who had said, *"You must get out of this form. You must get yourself back to your normal state."*

And then I came back to the feverish, jealous thoughts that had caused me to ask the attendant to take me over this particular trail.

Jealousy? Or was it something less definite? *Suspicion*—that was it.

Flora had had a date with a *charming wolf in sheep's clothing,* she had said.

That could mean only one thing, I thought. Ernest Marsch. He was still alive, he was somewhere in the immediate vicinity, and he had seen Flora.

I didn't like it. I remembered what she had said about relying upon my protection during our space hop. Otherwise, she had said, she might have resorted to the use of her pistol.

Did she have a pistol now?

How had he found her? Where had they met? Why had she agreed to go with him through the spiral tunnel beyond Laboratory X to explore a museum full of bones?

Before this night's exercise was over I meant to find some of the answers for myself. I had only the vaguest idea, I must admit, as to how much exercise would be required before I got to the bottom of things.

The truck had swung around the wide plaza and taken a cloverleaf turn to ascend the mountain road. We were moving at approximately ten miles an hour, I guessed.

I was using my legs to much greater advantage than ever before. You know how it is with a child who has spent several months crawling and suddenly discovers it can walk. I was not only walking, I was running.

The rope which they had fastened to the harness around my neck and shoulders was long enough that I could run up alongside the cab to check on my speed.

"How fast?" I asked.

The attendant and the driver both gave a nervous lurch whenever they discovered me moving along beside their window.

"Eight miles an hour," said the attendant. "Take it easy. You're not supposed to overwork."

"I feel like going faster," I said. I stepped up my speed and would have run along in front of them if they hadn't stepped on the accelerator.

I don't think they liked the sight of me, moving along in their lights. After all, I must have looked to them like the world's biggest, snakiest lizard, galloping along on a leash.

They moved past me, and I caught up again.

"Step on it," I said. "I feel the need of exercise."

They doubled their pace, and I stayed with them.

In a moment the attendant called out to me, "We're up to thirty-two miles an hour. That's fast enough. They'll give me hell if I let you run your legs off."

"It's a perfectly comfortable speed," I said. "But I'm in the mood to race."

"Oh, so that's it." The attendant growled something to the driver. They figured they'd take it out of me in another five minutes.

I KEPT an eye on the trail as we accelerated again. I was kicking up

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my share of dust, now, at forty-five miles an hour, and every now and then my tail would whip down against the road, and that, you may believe, was unintentional. It was a beginner's awkwardness, you might say. No snake spanks himself on purpose.

I was watching the trail, and here came the curving mile I had been waiting for. It was a good piece of road, except that it was so full of twists and turns you might think it would put a permanent wave in a serpent's backbone. Just below the edge of the road the ledge dropped straight down about sixty feet—to the roofs of the fortress.

In other words, we had gained enough elevation to switch back over the laboratories.

I bounded up beside the cab and shouted, "Faster!"

The driver moved the speedometer up to sixty-five miles an hour. "How's that?" he yelled.

"Just right," I said, falling back gradually. "Hold it right there for ten minutes."

"Can you take it?"

"If I can't, I'll shout."

Then I fell back gradually. The driver and the attendant kept their spotlight on the curves ahead and let me shift for myself. That was just what I wanted.

Snap! Ever since we had started, I had been biting at the rope that was fastened to my harness. With one savage bite I finished the job. I was free.

The truck whirled on around the bend, dragging the rope behind it.

I bounded down over the embankment, clinging tight with all of my crawling muscles.

Four or five minutes later, when the sounds of the truck's brakes reached my ears, I was already slithering over the glass and metal roofs of the laboratories. I was in the mood to be free, for a change, and it would take more than six moons and a truck's spotlight to find me among these roofs.

CHAPTER XII

I RESTED for a full hour, lying in a perfect hiding place a few feet from a chimney and a ventilator. I could imagine what the driver and the attendant were saying as they played their spotlight over the rocks, up and down the mountainside and out across the roofs, looking for me. They had better practice their story well before they went back empty handed, I thought, if they were going to make it stick.

I could just hear them trying to pass the buck. "I *told* the driver we shouldn't race him faster than fifteen miles an hour." Or— "How the hell did *I* know? I'm just the driver, and if the damned snake wanted exercise, it made no difference to me, as long as the attendant didn't kick."

But the alibis wouldn't be enough, I was sure: not unless someone could produce the serpent. The crusty old Captain of the Guards would be pretty sure to get the job of running me down. And I knew that he would be the guy who could make a thorough job of it. So I had better make hay before they got the squads on my trail.

As soon as those flashes of light ceased to glide over the roofs, I took a long chance and crawled quietly to the nearest dimly lighted section of glass roof.

"A greenhouse," I said to myself. "Now where would the laboratories be from here?"

I lumbered along at a good pace over the metal surfaces. They were still warm from the day's sun, and their rust and grime and rock dust didn't make for comfortable crawling. Over

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the glass roofs I took extra care, for once I struck a loose pane and it fell through with a crash. Another light came on, down in that section of greenhouse, and a pygmy gardener came in with a sprinkler in his hand, looking around to see what was the matter.

I tried to hold my breath. When I let go with a quiet "Hssssh!" he looked up and saw my head through the aperture. He screeched bloody murder and rolled over his sprinkler in a faint. I didn't wait to see how soon he revived, but skimmed along to a safer realm.

At least, I hoped it would be a safer realm. But the direction I chose failed to offer the solitude I needed.

Eight pygmies on the roof! Now what were *they* doing there?

The most obvious answer was, they were playing with fire. I crawled up toward them silently and looked in on their party.

Down in a four-foot depression where the irregular roofs had been joined with a patchwork of corrugated metal, they had lighted a few torches and were heating a branding iron.

"Put your initials on him while you're at it," one of them said, adding a low, cackling laugh.

"Don't let him squeal and spoil the fun," came another Masha cackle.

One of the dark little creatures waved a restraining hand across the firelight. "Before we touch the iron, he might like to have one more chance. How about it, Kipper?"

It was seven against one. I crept a little closer to study the evil faces by the light of the torches. Eight little Mashas. Seven of them wore only the red loin cloths, the costume of the outsider.

The eighth wore, in addition to the red loin cloth, a green neckband which was the band of the servant, and an armband which denoted his particular rank and function. He was tied, and gagged, and as completely helpless as a mouse dying in a trap.

The leader of the seven outsiders swung the red-hot iron in a circle. "Anything to say, Kipper? Wouldn't you like to play on our side for a change?"

"Wug!" That was all he could say, choked by a cloth gag.

"Touch him up with the heat and he'll whistle out of his ears. Here, give *me* the iron—"

BUT the leader kept the party in his own hands. He recited a little speech which gave me the lowdown I needed to understand the situation. He said that *if* Kipper had been so completely drugged by the scientists' serums that he *couldn't* do anything but stupidly obey orders, it would be different.

"But we've put you to the test, Kipper, and we've found out that you're *not* one of their victims. You're playing their servant, all right, but you're also playing some game of your own. Now we're giving you your chance to come back to us."

Kipper's eyes were stubborn slits, and his wrinkled brown cheeks were as hard as steel, and there was a defiance in his little jaws that his seven torturers weren't going to break down.

"All right, Kipper."

The leader ran the point of the red-hot iron across his chest to burn a thin dark line. Kipper's elbows dug tight at his sides.

The leader withdrew the iron, so that for the moment its light showed the gleam of cruelty in his own round eyes. His large mouth sagged with a brutal expression. You could almost hear the clank of chains in his thin, taunting voice. This was Jallan, one of the plotters who had engineered the recent at-

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tack on the fortress.

"Now, Kipper," Jallan snatched the gag out of his mouth, "we give you your last chance. Are you willing to play our game, and help us into control? Are you willing? Or are you going to go on, another hundred years, being a lone wolf?"

"I was a lone wolf on Mars," said Kipper coldly. "I've never asked a damned thing of any of you except that you let me go my own way."

Jallan gave a flourish with the iron. He touched the point of it to the torches that burned together in a single red flame.

"Put the gag in his mouth, Padderman. Or should we let his scream make music for the whole valley of Mashas? That's it, gag him well. Now I'll give him something he'll carry with him for a thousand years."

"Brand him with an *L.W.*—for 'lone wolf,'" said Padderman, marking the letters in the air with his gnarled finger.

"I'll brand a hole right through his guts. Here goes!"

"Hisssssss!" I breathed audibly. Then forcibly. *"HISSSSSSSSS!"*

The second blast from my serpent lips upset the party and blew the fire out.

"Serpent!" someone cried. They all saw me, looming there above them. And that did it. Talk about bats out of hell. You never heard such a beating of feet over a tin roof. Clatter-clatter-spill-clang!! Clatter-clatter—over and away and off into the distant sounds of the night.

When the sounds of their disorganized retreat had died away, there was still the low hissing of my breath, and the sizzle of my spit on the red-hot branding iron. And there was still the muffled choking, gasping and coughing of Kipper as I drew the gag out of his mouth and unfastened the cords that bound him.

"Don't be afraid of me," I said, as gently as any serpent could be expected to speak under the circumstances. "I had a square meal earlier in the evening. I'll not be dangerous."

CHAPTER XIII

IT WAS a strange friendship that grew out of that meeting. If I ever met a bold and hardy spirit, Kipper was it. The old term, Lone Wolf, had never meant much to me before. But here, believe me, was a man who filled the bill.

A *man*, did I say?

For the first time, I was thinking of a pygmy not in terms of the calories he would offer for my hungry stomach, but in terms of the staunch, stubborn, indomitable human will that characterizes a *man*.

Here was a two-and-a-half-foot human creature who had cut his own pattern of life for more than two centuries. The rigors of severe Martian winters, and the magic of that baffling climate, had taken a toll. He no longer possessed the proud five-foot-ten stature that had been his earthly possession. But shrunken and dwarfed and wrinkled and ancient, he was still a man who possessed his own will.

Before that night was an hour older, he was telling me, as confidentially as a brother, how he came and went through the halls of Dr. Hunt's scientific fortress.

"A servant? Yes, I'm a servant. I'm a servant because I want to be, not because the serums force me to be."

"But they do give you the serums?" I asked.

"As regularly as the setting of the sun. But I *resist* the effects. Don't ask me how. That's just me. I resist

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the effects of medicine the same as I resist the influences of my enemies. Sometimes I pay a price."

He touched the burn across his chest.

The squadron from the Captain's headquarters was at work by this time, moving along the mountain trail above the building's roofs, playing their searchlights in all directions. The scampering Mashas were probably getting a second scare, unless they had a very safe hiding place near the fortress.

"We'll be safer down in the laboratories," Kipper said. "Or do you dare go down? There's an open skylight over this way. It's my regular night exit when I need a breath of air—and incidentally, it's a favorite entrance for the Mashas who have designs on this realm."

"Lead the way, Kipper," I said.

Kipper led the way and I followed. For Kipper it was a well-worn trail. For me it was full of hazards—openings that were too small and glass walls that were too fragile. However, twenty minutes of twisting and turning and feeling our way through dark passages, brought us into a deep basement descent, dimly illuminated with blue wall-lights.

"This," said Kipper, "spirals down to the museum of skeletons. If you're not in a hurry—"

"Just a minute," I said. I didn't want this to lead to anything embarrassing, and I wasn't too sure of my grounds. It was a fact that I had originally wanted to find my way to this very spiral descent. That's where I had set out for, in taking my exercise tour over the roofs. Lab X had been my goal, with its spiral passage beyond, and eventually the museum. However —"I hope you'll pardon me if I meet a friend down here."

"That's *my* expectation," said Kipper. "I mean, I'm intending to meet a friend."

"Huh?" I was growing more uneasy. My errand of jealousy wouldn't thrive on too much congestion. "I'd better explain myself. I have a friend —Flora Hessel—and an enemy, Ernest Marsch. The less they see of each other, the better it suits me. But she told me very bluntly that she had had a date with him here recently. Do you follow?"

"Go on," said Kipper.

"I like the gal," I said. "Even though I'm now living a snakely existence, I hate to see her get mixed up with a hard-boiled wolf like Marsch. He isn't good for her, believe me. Do you follow?"

"You're jealous," said Kipper.

"I'm a green-eyed serpent. That's why I've come. If I find that he's lurking down in this lost region, I'm going to have the pleasure of snapping his head off before I report back to headquarters."

KIPPER had stopped, looking at me with a curious expression. He cupped his ear, and I thought I heard, too. Footsteps. That could be Flora Hessel, coming down our way. I wondered if I had said too much. He was beginning to smile at me strangely.

"I hope I'm not in danger," he said.

"Why should you be?"

"Didn't you say she had a date with a wolf?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right, I have a date with Flora Hessel," said Kipper. "I must be the wolf she referred to."

I blinked. Had I misjudged this keen-eyed, straight-shooting little fellow? "You—a wolf?"

"Didn't you hear them call me a Lone Wolf? They were going to brand me L.W."

"Oh—*Lone* Wolf — that's different.

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Did she mean *you?"*

By that time the footsteps had materialized into Flora herself. She gave a surprised gasp to see the two of us together.

"Oh, you know each other!" Flora exclaimed with a lift of delight in her voice. "Fine. I'm so glad. Isn't he charming, Bob? I told you he was a charming wolf in sheep's clothing, didn't I?"

Kipper cleared his throat. *"Lone* Wolf, if you please. You mixed your terms, Madam, and I think you'd better apologize before your misshapen friend gets the wrong impression."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Lone Wolf, of course. Anyway, Bob, he's perfectly delightful, and he's given me more information about the goings-on of this place than I'd get from the attendants in a hundred years. All these skeletons down here—"

She talked on, as glibly as a chattering magpie, while she and Kipper led me into the opening chamber of the museum of white bones. All of my jealous emotions were suddenly as dead as the specimen we were examining. If I failed to catch all the interesting facts they were giving me as they guided me through the place, it was because I was saying to myself, "What a silly serpent you were, Bob Garrison, to get all green-eyed about nothing at all. It was all your foolish imagination."

And yet I couldn't be too severe with myself, considering how things had turned out. If I hadn't started out to get the lowdown, I wouldn't have saved Kipper from an ugly ordeal.

As it was, I had two staunch friends, both of them wise and understanding. They were ready to help me through with my purpose of recovering Dr. Hunt from their weird world *if* it was humanly possible.

Or if it wasn't *humanly* possible, perhaps some *inhuman* talents from a serpent would be effective. At any rate I thought I was on the trail.

"But Flora," I protested, "I'm still in the dark about Ernest Marsch. Hasn't he popped up anywhere along the line to claim your services?"

She shook her pretty head. "I haven't seen him since we came into the planet's explosion zone," she said.

Kipper had stopped to listen at one of the museum phones.

"A bit of trouble back in the laboratories," he said. "They're all stirred up over their missing serpent."

"Do you think we should go back and report?" I asked.

"That would be safest," said Kipper. "Otherwise they may punish the driver and the attendant severely for losing you. Furthermore, they may send out a general announcement to shoot you on sight."

"We'll go back," I said. I took a quick look at the weird conglomeration of skeletal forms all around me, gleaming white and chalky in the blue light. There was one pedestal that had been placed recently, with no skeleton on it. Flora gave me a suspicious look, and we both guessed that it was being prepared for me. We hurried away without speaking of it. But I was filling up with unanswered questions, and one of these times I'd have to get Kipper in a corner and pump him.

"Worried?" Kipper asked blithely as we made our exit.

"It's nothing," I said. "Just a slight ache through my vertebrae."

CHAPTER XIV

WITH Kipper's help, Flora returned to the elevation of general living quarters unnoticed. He assisted me in slipping into a corridor that

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would lead to Lab H—Dr. Hunt's own stamping ground—from which I would be able to face my own situation with all possible advantages.

"You don't jump through walls, and they know it," Kipper advised me before he left, "so you'd better get some answers ready for them. But don't tell them too much. Remember, you're a snake."

"Hissss!" I said agreeably.

Kipper gave me a satisfied wink and went on his way.

I knew how to put a stop to all of the quandary over my disappearance the easiest way, I thought. I would go to the phone from which Dr. Hunt had made his general announcements and I would simply say, "Hissss! When do I get my ssssupper?"

I was crossing through the six-cornered room, moving carefully, for it was almost completely dark, and I didn't want to welcome myself back with a crash of any expensive glass tubes. I had got as far as Dr. Hunt's rolling chair in the middle of the room when I heard the sounds of low voices from somewhere in the vicinity of the nearest laboratory table. As a serpent, whose flesh and bones were of great interest to these scientists, I had every reason to be interested in low, whispery voices.

One of the voices was that of Dr. Winston.

"How much do you think the serpent knows?" Winston said quietly.

I could see Winston's tall, courtly figure silhouetted against the faint circle of light emanating from one of the instruments.

The voice which answered Winston was not familiar, but I knew at once that it was not Dr. Hunt's. It had a deep-cistern quality—a hollow echo, like a voice coming through a long, dark tunnel. And yet it was distinct, with sharp, crackling edges to the consonant sounds, like little crackles of thunder very close to your ear.

"He knows," said the deep-cistern voice, "that Dr. Hunt was forced to come here."

"Then he must know," said Dr. Winston, "that there *is* a power which holds Dr. Hunt in control."

"He has not seen me," said the deep-cistern.

"I thought," Winston said, "that you had succeeded in influencing Hunt to have him killed at once—for his skeleton."

"That was my intention," the voice rumbled. "But Dr. Hunt's own plan rose up in his mind just when I thought I had succeeded. Dr. Hunt has never yet been completely subordinated . . ."

I was getting an earful, all right. I tried to catch sight of the form that gave out with the deep-cistern tones, but I couldn't see anyone except Dr. Winston. I was taking an awful risk, being here this way, and I was getting nervous. My tail kept twitching.

What if they should turn on a light?

What a dilemma! Somewhere they were stewing about losing me. The driver and the attendant were probably getting a verbal roasting for their carelessness. I should go to Dr. Hunt at once to prove that I had come back unharmed.

But I couldn't—I just couldn't walk out on an eaves-dropping set-up like this. Here, in one quick earful, I'd learned more about Dr. Hunt and Dr. Winston than in all of my talks with the scientists back on earth. *They* had believed that if I could once *find* Dr. Hunt and provide a way for him to return, that he'd jump at the chance.

NOW I saw, as plain as day, that someone held such a club over him that he couldn't be sure which of his

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thoughts were his own. It was that *power*—the deep-cistern voice—which had made Hunt plan to strip me into a skeleton. It was Hunt's own mercy that had schemed to postpone my dissection.

And what of Winston? Winston—my fine, handsome hero with the suave manner and the kingly appearance!

Was Winston also in league with this superior agent? Were the two of them keeping Dr. Hunt in subjection?

"Making a turnip out of him!" I muttered to myself. "Squeezing the blood of genius out of him for their own stew."

Yes, Dr. Hunt had delayed my dissection out of his own inspiration to send me on a mission—to let me confront those skulking outcasts of space who called themselves the Mashas, to see whether I could learn, from the inside, what dangerous powers they possessed.

But hadn't Dr. Winston also had the same idea?

As I looked back upon their moment of inspiration, it seemd to me that both doctors had caught the idea simultaneously. It had happened under the purple light, when I had stood frozen with three pygmies beneath my open jaws. I wondered—

Swish-swish-swish — that was Dr. Winston, now sauntering toward another table. In another moment he would switch on a light.

I didn't dare creep any farther across the room. I might bump into the deep-voiced *power*.

Should I hide? Or should I face them?

After what I had just heard, they might kill me!

The wheeled-chair. It was right at hand. I crawled silently around it, into it, around its back and into the underside of it.

No squeaks, thank goodness. The repair man had oiled it recently. I wondered if he had put new upholstery on it too. My scales had gathered dust and rust from the roof. Would I leave marks?

I did a tall job of coiling myself, and quite a length of tail was left over. This, however, I automatically coiled into a disc of flesh, wound like a clock-spring, and allowed that end of me to fold over into the seat.

The lights went on along one wall.

I thought I caught a glimpse of the deep-cistern voice for just an instant, at the edge of the green glow. But I was uncertain. From the corner of my eye it seemed that I was seeing a huge model of a *human skull, almost as large as a barrel*. It was moving back out of my range of vision, and I didn't dare look. It must have been a piece of apparatus, I thought. Or was it a mask?

The deep-cistern voice came from that direction, and now I thought of it as a voice resounding through a large empty skull.

"I should go," the voice said. "Dr. Hunt shouldn't find us here together."

"He'll be in soon," said Winston. "He's holding court for the two men who let the serpent get away. As soon as he calls, I'll roll his chair in for him."

The deep voice chuckled. "Very fond of that throne, isn't he! Why don't you take that honor away from him?"

I SHUDDERED, and the chills tried to slide through the crooked route from my neck to my tail.

"You're tempting me," said Dr. Winston. I could see him standing a few feet in front of the chair, stroking his square jaws with his white, sensitive fingers.

"You might allow yourself four arms, too, you know," said the deep-voiced power. "Then you'd fit into the rolling

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throne quite as gracefully as he does."

"I can fill it," Winston said, not sure but what he was being taunted. He was looking at me without seeing me. But the color effect of my green and purple scales made an impression. "Well, look at this!"

"What?"

"New upholstery job. Hunt's been asking for it. But I hadn't noticed—"

The phone on the chair gave two sharp rings.

"That's Hunt, calling for me," Winston said. "I'd just as well ride in. He'll never know."

He crawled into the seat and leaned back against the flattened coils of my flesh.

I could imagine that the deep-voiced power must have seen me by then. But I was wrong. He spoke, "Well, how does it feel? Quite important, eh? You'd like it, Winston. Think it over."

The phone rang again—two angry rings.

Dr. Winston touched the controls. The rolling chair gave a little lurch, then stopped short. I must have been weighing down on the brakes. I tried to shift just a trifle.

Two more rings.

"Why don't you go?" the voice called from the far side of the room. "He'll be suspicious."

"I'm *trying*—"

"Well, anyway, *I'm* going. Think over what I told you."

The swish-swish-swish gave me the picture of large soft-surfaced feet beneath that barrel-sized skull—though I must say it wasn't a very complete picture in my mind. All I knew was that the mysterious man—or creature—who directed the goings-on of these laboratories with a sinister hand, was making a quiet exit. I leaned, trying to catch one more glimpse. My effort was too much for the balance of the chair. I saw the disappearing shadow of a huge skull, with light from an outer room gleaming through a translucent eye. Then the rear door closed.

The chair was tipping backwards. I touched my hand to the floor just in time to avoid a spill.

"Oooof!"

Dr. Winston jerked forward. Then he sat back, testing the seat. He bounced a little, and was about to get out to see what was wrong; but the coils of my tail (which he had taken for new green - and - purple upholstery) moved just a trifle—just enough to catch a light grip on his waist.

He pushed the "upholstery" back and brushed his hands, muttering, "Sticky!"

Then Dr. Hunt came striding in, looking tough enough to eat glass.

"What's the matter? Why didn't you come?" Dr. Hunt stopped short, giving Winston the cold eye. "What's this? Have you traded places with me?"

"Something's wrong," said Winston weakly. "I couldn't get it to go."

"Get out of there. I'll show you how."

"I'm stuck in the new upholstery," said Winston.

"*New* upholstery? *What* new—*Ugh!*"

The doctor's eyes jumped in a way that caused Winston to turn pale. Or perhaps it was the fact that I had considered it time to uncurl myself, having no desire to usurp Dr. Hunt's pet throne.

Once I started, I uncurled rapidly; but the curve of my tail slid into a loop around Dr. Winston's waist, and I drew him right over the back of the chair. When my action began he gave a gulping sound and started to mutter some sort of prayer under his breath; but a moment later he was saying nothing, for he saw me and fainted dead

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away.

I dropped him on the floor and turned to drink in Dr. Hunt's frozen stare. I glanced upward, for a moment thinking that the paralysis ray must be on. No, it was simply Dr. Hunt trying hard to believe his own eyes.

CHAPTER XV

I GAVE a bow and a hiss and tried to ease a very tense situation by laughing lightly.

"Well, what next!" Dr. Hunt gasped.

"Did they tell you I was missing?" I said. "I came back. I came into Laboratory H to report, but there was some kind of conference going on."

"Yes?"

"So I thought I'd wait by your chair and tell you when you came in. You should know what they were saying."

Dr. Hunt mopped his forehead and checked up on his sharp mustaches and beard as if he thought they might be missing. Then he gathered his faculties together and began to talk, heedless of what I was about to tell him.

"I've been getting you ready for a job," he said. The glint in his eye told me that he considered it important for me to prepare quickly and indulge in no foolishness. He gave me a motion to stand to one side. I waited by the wall while he gave Winston a few slaps with all four of his hands to bring the man to life. Winston came up nodding and blinking, and sat while Dr. Hunt gave me his orders.

"You've come back to this lab after you were away and free—am I right?"

"Right," I said.

"Then you'll come back again," he said, "and I'm going to depend on it. I have faith that you're a straight serpent. See?"

I didn't deter him with any hints that I might or I might not be, depending upon his plans for turning me into a museum-piece. I knew now that, if left to his own devises, Dr. Hunt would postpone that unpleasantness for me as long as possible.

"I'm going to send you on your assignment at once," Dr. Hunt said. "Come this way and I'll show you the map of the territory once more."

I looked at Dr. Hunt and saw that he meant business. So he wasn't going to make me account for my runaway act. Instead, he was going to press me into service before I embarked on any more monkeyshines.

I might have complied without any hesitation, and considered it an honor —if I hadn't caught a sidelong glance from Winston, sitting there, watching me with a cold eye. The fellow was still badly chilled, I knew. He kept rubbing his sides where my scales had clutched him. But the real part of his scare was because I knew too much.

"This way," Dr. Hunt repeated, motioning to me with three or four arms.

I stamped about, folded my lower legs under me, and rose high on my forelegs, craning my neck and head upward as if I meant to be heard. I caught a glimpse of myself reflected in some of the glass utensils, and my very pose helped to inspire me for what I needed to say.

"It it high time, Dr. Hunt, that you and I cleared some atmosphere between us," I said.

The doctor's beard gave an impatient twitch, but he stopped cold and took me in.

"I came here from the earth for a purpose," I said. "I came in the guise of a pilot for Ernest Marsch, who is planning some commercial enterprise from this planet. But my real reason for coming was *to get you.*"

Dr. Hunt placed his fists on his hips. "Why should you want to get me?"

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"Because you're too useful a scientist to desert the earth. I want to take you back. Your own planet and your own solar system need you."

"I'm doing very well here, thank you," said Hunt. I saw him cast a quick look at Winston before he added, "After all, I'm running the best research laboratory you ever saw. You haven't convinced me that there's anything more advanced on the earth."

"Granted," I said. "But maybe I *can* convince you that *you aren't running this place.* You should have heard what I just heard. Dr. Winston and that deep-voiced fellow have just been gloating over the way they're duping you, Dr. Hunt!"

MY WORDS struck hard. I thought the doctor's mustaches were going to spike his eyebrows. All four of his hands came up in defense. I went on:

"*They're* planning to turn me into a laboratory skeleton, and they forced that plan into your mind, *somehow,*" I said. "You were all ready to go through with it, too. You've even set up a pedestal for my bones to rest on. But your *own* good scientific judgment got the better of you and made you wait. You know that I'm more valuable alive than dead. If you can observe me, and watch me function, and prove my usefulness—"

The doctor was moving toward me slowly, with a wonderful light of curiosity in his fine face.

"*Who* did you say is duping me?" he asked slowly.

"Dr. Winston and some fellow with a voice like a deep cistern."

Winston sprang to his feet. "Don't believe a word of it. That snake is just hissing to hear his own breath."

"*Is* he?" Dr. Hunt scowled deeply.

"I'll keep right on hissing," I said. "I'll tell you both what I overheard while I was hiding around that chair. The deep-voiced fellow said it wouldn't be good for the two of them to be found here together."

"Very interesting," said the doctor.

"And he tempted Winston to take over your throne."

"Indeed."

"Stop it!" Winston cried. "I'm your friend, Dr. Hunt, and you know it."

"We all know, Dr. Hunt," I went on, gesturing with my long arm, "that you came here because you were forced to come. Do you admit that, Dr. Hunt?"

Hunt was too busy searching Winston's eyes to answer me. Winston was coming toward him, both hands extended, and he was doing a good job of imploring.

"*I'm* your *friend,* Dr. Hunt," he was saying. "You *know* I'm your friend. You're not going to listen to that—that *snake!*"

"He's a snake by an accident of fate," Hunt growled. "But if he's lying, I'll see that he's boiled in oil." He turned to me. "What did this deep-voiced fellow look like?"

"I didn't see him," I said. "I only saw the shadow of a big skull."

"How big was he?"

"I don't know. It was dark, and after I hid in the chair I couldn't turn to see, even after the lights went on. But I'd know his voice among ten million voices."

"Which way did he go?"

"Out that door. You had rung, and he said it was time for him to leave."

Winston began to laugh. He mocked my words so thoroughly that he almost shook me loose from the facts I had seen with my own eyes.

There wasn't anything more I could do or say. I had played my hand, and I was losing. You see, it wasn't easy

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for Dr. Hunt to place any trust in a newcomer like me on such short acquaintance. I had already pulled my share of snaky tricks, and this might be another. I couldn't reach in a secret pocket and pull out a fistful of credentials that proved the earth scientists had sent me here to bring Hunt back. I didn't even have a pocket. I only had scales and a pair of deceitful looking eyes and a monstrous form that made men shudder to look at me.

"If you'll pardon me," said Winston, "I think I'll go take a bath. That slimy thing left me with the creeps."

That was all he needed to say. *I was a snake.* Any warning truths I might offer were *just so much hissing.*

"I'll give you some pointers on the new experiment a little later, Dr. Winston," Dr. Hunt said with his usual professional manner—and that was enough to convince me that I hadn't dented the confidence that existed between these two. Dr. Hunt turned to me. "As for you, you may either go forth on your assignment or return quietly to your cage. Which will it be?"

CHAPTER XVI

I MOVED along at a slow, thoughtful crawling pace through the remainder of the night, watching the last of the six moons slide silently through the skies.

The air was fresh and fragrant, and I was glad to be away from the odors of the mountain fortress. A whiff of blossom scents caused me to turn my course toward the long jagged black line, far down the valley, which I knew to be the crevasse.

That crevasse, with its river two miles below the surface of the land, had offered me plenty of pain since I had first fallen into this weird world. But it was not like the pain that I suffered now—the pain of not being trusted. Strange to say, I felt a nostalgic attraction for the crevasse again, and half wished that I might return to its rocky walls and bathe again in its warm waters.

What a mood! I was nursing my injuries. I was sore because Dr. Hunt hadn't toppled for my first invitation to junk his set-up on Space Island and come back to the earth with me.

I was sore and disillusioned because Dr. Winston had so quickly collapsed from a fine, wholesome hero with a keen intellect to a sinister, conniving heel.

Was he that? Somehow I continued to cling to a hope that he wasn't. If that deep-cistern voice had managed to put a malicious bug in Dr. Hunt's brain, maybe he had done the same thing for Dr. Winston. Maybe he was duping both of the boys and making suckers out of them.

I looked back to the road that led to the mountain fortress. Why had I come away before I had got to the bottom of these things? Why hadn't I stayed at least long enough to *see* that deep-cistern voice and find out where *it* lived and what *it* meant to do.

Could it have been some sort of animal, like myself, with a heavy human skull—a deep throat—soft swishy feet?

Then as I lay on the soft grass and closed my eyes to turn my troubles over in a half-sleeping mind, my thoughts returned to the missing Ernest Marsch . . . I wondered. . . .

How long ago it seemed! . . . I was thinking back to our flight. . . .

We had been flying through space only an hour, I recalled, when Flora Hessel first discovered that Marsch had deceived her.

"Where is my female companion?" Flora had asked.

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The incident came back clearly through the channels of memory.

"I'd told you there'd be a female companion to travel with you," Marsch had answered sharply, "and I've kept my promise. Now stop your silly worrying."

It was Flora Hessel's first trip away from the earth, and although I was kept busy in the control room, I could hear snatches of their conversation, and I knew that she was uneasy. I dreaded to think that she might be that way all the way from the solar system to Space Island. But she was being reasonable and patient. All she wanted to know, now that we had embarked from the earth, was, who was her female companion and why couldn't they meet at once and get acquainted?

Ernest Marsch lighted a cigar and began to pace uneasily. I saw that his mate, Pete Hogan, was getting nervous, watching to see what Marsch meant to do. *I* knew, and Hogan must have known, that there wasn't any other lady on board the ship.

"Your companion's name is Terry," said Marsch. "Ma Terry. She's in the second stateroom having a nap. No use to wake her. She's a safe enough companion for anyone. She likes people and she has a soft heart, just like you, Miss Hessel. You two ought to get along just fine."

I SAW Pete Hogan gulp. He didn't say a word. Whenever Ernest Marsch made a statement, it stood; Hogan was not one to cross him up.

Marsch came toward the control room, his wide shoulders filling the doorway for a moment. He saw that I was busy, and blowing a puff of smoke in my direction he closed the door on me, so that I wouldn't notice what happened next.

But I was curious, so I set the controls and opened the visor that gave me a view of the main room.

Flora Hessel was getting angry and suspicious. When Marsch tried to divert her from her questions by putting an arm around her, she began to storm. She didn't want any of his petting. All she wanted was to see Ma Terry.

I opened the door a crack to hear the conversation, then.

"Get Ma Terry," Marsch said to Hogan, champing angrily on his cigar.

"If you say so."

"I said so, didn't I? Get her."

"Miss Hessel may be kinda disappointed," Pete Hogan said dubiously.

"Shut up!"

Hogan shrugged and went to the second stateroom and opened the door. He whistled. "Come, Terry."

Out came a little black-and-white terrier dog.

"She's a Mamma Terrier," Marsch said out of curled lips. "We call her Ma Terry for short. That's your female companion. I always keep my promises. She's gentle and soft hearted, just like you. You two ought to get along just fine."

Flora Hessel walked up to Marsch, then, and slapped his face. He was red and white and purple, and he came at her with a fist. Hogan gave a gesture as if to stop him, and gulped a scared, "Don't do it—don't."

But I was the guy who dashed in and put the strongarm on the boss in time to keep Flora from getting her teeth knocked out. One solid sock to his jaw did the trick. He lay in the corner for two hours and no one touched him.

Flora kept to her room most of the time after that, though she occasionally came into the main room when several of us were gathered there—for lunch, or a game of cards, or a round of sky-study. Marsch must have felt

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that he'd pulled a pretty crude gag when she refused to warm up to his advances. Evidently he had thought she'd fall into his arms, not because he was so handsome, but because he was the boss and was able to talk in big terms about some nebulous commercial venture he was getting ready to launch from Space Island.

He kept his temper under control, for the most part; but his savage feelings were right there under the surface, and he saved a choice bit of demonstration for Flora. It happened after Flora had made friends with "Ma Terry" and had got in the habit of feeding the dog right after our lunch, talking as kindly with it as she might have with her own sister. Marsch had watched with growing jealousy and waited for his chance.

Then it came: the dog got under his feet by mistake, and he gave it a kick. It whimpered, and he kicked it again. Flora asked him to stop, and that was all he needed. In a fit of anger he kicked "Ma Terry" to death.

After the dog was disposed of, Marsch walked back and forth through the ship, eying any of us who happened to be talking, as if just daring us to criticize his action. It was his expedition, and by god he'd run things as he pleased.

It was a pretty unhappy trip, after that. He and I were right on the ragged edge of a gun fight once when someone separated us. At another time I was already to walk into him with my fists swinging, when he changed his mind about something that had led to the trouble.

And so it had been, as we approached Space Island, that he and I were keeping an eye on each other like two suspicious hawks. And then, as we had slowed down and were moving through the atmosphere for a landing, a strange and unaccountable explosion had struck us—*BLAMMMM!*—and the blinding white light had been the last thing I had remembered. . . .

And the next thing had been the water, deep down in the crevasse, hours and hours later . . . and I had awakened gradually to discover that I had become a serpent. . . .

Now the new day was dawning, and I curled up in the edge of a thicket whose greenish-blue hues would give me a color protection from the eyes of any chance passers-by. The weight of my troubles had made me weary, and I thought I would sleep the forenoon away. And I might have, if a space ship hadn't come zooming down from the sky.

BLAMMMM!

CHAPTER XVII

THE explosive qualities of Space Island were a fact to be reckoned with. Explosions were Space Island's official welcome, it seemed, for everything that dropped down out of the skies.

I had gone through it once myself. Later I had seen it happen to a dead space ship that floated in aimlessly. Now I was seeing it for the third time.

This was a shapely, well-knit ship that was obviously cruising into the valley for a landing. The deadly invisible trap caught it, and suddenly the splinters of wreckage were falling over a range of three or four miles, drifting down like so many feathers. I discerned a few human bodies among the falling objects. They were alive and kicking. Transformed? Well, not yet, at least. But soon!

Two of the falling men wore starchy blue uniforms, and one of these fell within a quarter of a mile of my hiding place. I sprang to my feet and went

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into a high-powered snake gallop, using my swiftest crawling muscles to give myself an extra boost from the belly with every leap.

Within forty yards of the fallen officer I stopped, hid myself, and waited.

He had struck easily, not like a man falling to the earth, but with the airiness of a balloon. He was sufficiently stunned, however, that he crawled off dizzily on his hands and knees. Should I have helped him up? I might have scared the poor fellow out of his wits. I waited, then slowly followed to keep him in sight.

Now it was apparent that he might have remained in his human form. But he was crawling toward a pool of water, and as soon as he began to drink, and to bathe his face, *it happened.*

It was a sight to watch, and I don't think I'd have stopped it if he had been my own grandfather.

His clothing began to fall away from him. He was resting on his hands and knees over the water. Like anyone else, he felt the need of the life-giving fluid after the blast of heat and pain he'd gone through.

His neck and head began to take on a beast-like shape. His body shortened and his legs contracted into the legs of pigs.

Legs, feet, ears, *snout! He was a wretched, grunting hog!*

He looked back at his clothes and gave a snort of disgust. Then he stood there, quite as dazed as a prizefighter who has taken a knockout. With his front feet in the edge of the pool and his snout burrowing senselessly in the mud, he let his eyes fall closed and went comfortably to sleep.

It had all happened within a few minutes of the explosion. What a strange landing!

Later I was to learn from Kipper more of the forces back of such events. The force that caused the explosions was a ray which emanated from a horizontal ray-gun imbedded in the mountains somewhere above the scientists' fortress. It and several others like it guarded the several surrounding valleys from the dangers of falling objects. If giant meteorites fell through space to land here, they, like all other approaching objects, must pass through the plane where the invisible rays would break them into pieces and retard their fall.

But the ray was not intended to be deadly in its effect upon living creatures. And the ray did not transform. The transformations were produced by certain natural elements—as I shall explain in a moment.

I looked beyond the sleeping pig, remembering that there were other fallen men to be considered.

One of them I spied less than a mile away. He had come through with no damage whatever. He was walking slowly toward the low foothills that lay pink in the morning sun. I slipped along cautiously for many yards, then stopped abruptly. His voice? Was he crying for help?

He was calling. I crawled closer until I caught his words.

"A messssage for the Massshas!" He was singing it out to the foothills. *"A messssage for the Massshas!"*

No, he wasn't out of his head. He knew exactly what he was doing. He and all the rest of this small party had come here with the intention of making contact with the Mashas. And this was the password.

It worked. Right away a delegation of twelve or fifteen pygmies came running out of the foothills to greet him.

Why? What was going on here? Another of the newcomers also moved toward the foothills, calling the password.

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FIVE low, artificial, earthen mounds provided the official entrance to Masha Land, an underground city. An arched opening in the center mound was just large enough for these two wayfarers from the sky to enter—on their hands and knees. The twelve or fifteen Mashas followed them in, and that was that. I was left to wonder what it was all about.

I can't say why I crawled back to the sleeping pig at the edge of the pool, unless it was because my appetite was rising. But as I was approaching, I looked back to the fortress mountains to see that the other part of this weird world had also taken notice of the new arrivals.

A squadron of fifteen planes roared out of the mountain and began to fly up and down the valley. The show was running true to form, I thought. Whoever had come in today's windfall, the fortress meant to get in on its share of the gleanings. That was how it had happened before: the scientists had sent out a search party to pick up the pieces—and also to reconvert into their human forms any newly formed specimens who weren't interesting enough in their design to deserve a place in Dr. Hunt's museum.

On this search, someone—or rather, *something*—was soon spotted. I wished I had got there in time to see what sort of monstrosity it was. But one of the planes had already circled down to fly over within a few feet of the surface of a stream of water. Out went a package of yellow powders. Pwoof! A small explosion of dust and steam!

Flora Hessel should have been here to see, I thought. This was exactly the way it had happened to her.

When the cloud cleared, the subject walked out in his normal human form—a fine looking specimen of a man.

The blimp came over, then, and a basket was dropped for the fellow. He finally got in, under protest. I could see that he didn't want the rescuers to know that he had had other plans. Obviously he had meant to find his way into the camp of the Mashas.

All of which meant that this particular party of earth men had come with a special purpose that had something to do with the Mashas. The scientists up in the mountains had better beware.

Once again I hurried back to the sleepy, grunting beast that I had left at the edge of a pool. As an officer, he wouldn't be taken over by the search squadron too easily, I thought.

But it happened that the planes didn't spot him. Their pygmy enemies got to him first. They came on him with *zeego* guns.

Once again, I thought that Flora Hassel should have been here to see, for she had also been the target of *zeego* fire.

Flash-flash-flash!

I held back, hardly breathing. Was it going to work again? Yes, it was happening. The three pygmies approached cautiously, then more confidently.

He was changing.

From grunting pork chops into a muttering officer! The transformation took place as swiftly as grease melts in a hot pan.

He was evidently the same officer. He had lost a share of his dignity with the loss of his clothes; but he was the same in his mannerisms, as soon as the pygmies had offered him a wrap to throw around his body. They were welcoming him, calling him by name, asking him whether he felt okay. They found him bewildered and a trifle uncertain of his directions. He wanted to consult a map from the clothing that he had lost, but when he examined the scraps he found everything too nearly

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demolished to be of any service. He placed his faith in the pygmies, then, and they conducted him away toward the five-mound entrance.

I drew a deep breath. My serpent cunning had permitted me to see a great many things in the last few minutes, and I was beginning to understand much that I hadn't understood before.

If the planes had found this sleeping hog first, I knew that they would have restored him to normal and taken him back to the fortress, just as they took Flora, and would have pressed him into service as a cook, or an attendant, or a guard, or a laboratory assistant—according to his talent. That was the way their kingdom was growing . . . And they might never know that he had come here with the secret purpose of plotting with the Mashas—not until sometime later when the Mashas' own brand of hell would break loose.

MOREOVER, I was understanding the series of conditions, at last, which appeared to underlie all of these weird bodily changes.

And as I understood, it gave me new hope that *I too might find my way back to normal.*

It was a triple punch—a game of one, two, three.

The first punch was man's ingenuity—the effects of hidden ray-guns which the scientists had planted in the mountains.

The second punch was nature's own, and must have been operating for centuries. Certain waters in this region played their surprise tricks upon the bodies of all comers who, stunned and fainting and thirsty, partook of their seemingly magic qualities.

The third punch—undoing nature's transformation—was something that might be accomplished *by shock.*

Any shock? *Zeego* fire?—yes. A flare of yellow powders?—yes. Other explosions or concussions? Perhaps. As I say, I was beginning to feel hopeful, for at last I was seeing a way to work these powders for my own purpose.

If I wanted Dr. Hunt to listen to my pleading, I should first return to human form. Then I could march back to the mountain fortress and make him hear me.

It was a hopeful moment for me, watching the Mashas lead the officer away. Just beyond my fingertips were the tracks of the pig's feet sharp-cut in the mud.

But I couldn't be too optimistic. I had already proved too hard-crusted for the *zeego* guns. As for the powders, I had withstood two explosions, and each time I had been only partially restored.

For the remainder of that day I lolled around in the sun, devising all sorts of shock treatments for myself, in imagination. I imagined throwing myself over the side of the mountain; but the memory of my fall through the crevasse gave me an awful shudder.

Could I leap under the wheels of a speeding truck? Could I start a forest fire and leap into it? Could I creep into the ranks of the guards at the fortress and start devouring them, so that they would shoot me with bullets?

None of these plans appealed to me as being pleasant, and I had visions that any of them might prove uncomfortable.

My nerves were pretty jumpy over all of this speculation. I wanted to restore myself to normal, but I didn't want to kill myself in the attempt. After all, it was better to live as a serpent than to die as a man.

"It is better to live as a serpent," I said to myself several times, "than to die as a man."

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I was fond of that conclusion and was tempted to carve it in stone. At any rate, I had found some consolation. I was a serpent, but at least I had my human memory and most of my normal faculties of reasoning, only lightly adulterated by serpent instincts. I had better leave well-enough alone, and not tempt the fates to cancel what was left of me.

"It's not so bad being a serpent," I told myself, "after you once get your belly toughened up."

And so, after crawling through a maze of mysteries, I was beginning to find myself.

I approached the mounds quietly.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Mashas were inside their mounds, warm and comfortable, no doubt. A light rain was sprinkling down over my forty-foot form, and I shivered with the thought that the waters of Space Island might transform me again and take away the arms and legs . . .

But no, I had encountered rains before with no ill effects. I was safe. My theory of transformation might be faulty, but I needn't fear the rain.

The only trouble was that these foothills I was crossing so carefully were structures of earth. I was not only leaving a twisted path in the moistened dust, I was occasionally causing a piece of some Masha's roof to fall in.

Clunk!

I heard a screech of annoyed pygmy voices below me. I had probably knocked half a ton of earth down on their supper. I scurried down into the depression between the mounds and threaded my way swiftly to other places.

I came back to one of the five mounds that provided the entrance to this honeycomb city. Of all the hundred questions that were making quick chills of adventure play along my spine, the most tantalizing was, *Why had these newly arrived full-grown earth people been welcomed here? What strange game was going on within these mounds?*

Low voices were welling up through the open ventilator of the farthest mound as I crept up to the crest of its earthen roof. They were pygmy voices. Two wizened little officials were in conference. They were sitting on the earth floor, their bronzed bodies highlighted by a flickering red fire.

"We lost one of them to the blimp," one was admitting. "They will hold him unless we invade and rescue him. Marsch says there isn't time. We'll attack tomorrow morning."

"Anyway three of Marsch's leaders came through. If they're as clever as Marsch claims, we have a fighting chance to win, this time."

Marsch? Ernest Marsch? Was he mixed up in this world? I was holding my breath for fear I'd gasp too loudly over the tile ventilator shaft.

They were obviously planning to storm the fortress again soon, and these pygmy officials were saying that the newly arrived men were leaders who had come at Marsch's request. There was some grumbling of disappointment because one of the newcomers had been whisked away by the blimp. The same thing, someone said, had happened to the girl that Marsch had brought a few days before. She had been one of his special employees, and the fortress had got her.

"We should have had her, at all costs."

"Well, who's to blame? You saw for yourself that she'd become a two-headed cat. All you had to do was turn the *zeego* fire on her."

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"All right, keep harping on it. We'd have had her if that snaky monster hadn't whirled into the picture."

"So you stopped shooting?"

"He got one of us, as it was."

"You might have turned your guns on him."

"But Marsch didn't want him—not alive, I mean. Let the scientists have him. By this time they probably have him on a pedestal."

They ceased to grumble about lost opportunities a moment later when a messenger brought them the announcement that Marsch would hold a pre-invasion assembly tonight.

"Pre-invasion?" someone said skeptically. "I have the inside information that Marsch is really planning something else. Those new ships he's patched together are all set for a space hop. He's going to take the whole lot of us to some new planet to start a new colony."

BY THIS time I knew there were at least a dozen pygmy officials in the room, though my view allowed me to see only three or four at a time. There was considerable dissention over what Marsch might be planning for them. The official report was that bombing ships were ready, and that the Masha volunteers would fly over the fortress and win it by dropping a few bombs.

But the rumor was spreading that Marsch's real plan was to transport them all to a brighter land.

All of which left me guessing. What was Marsch's commercial angle? He wasn't playing missionary to these downtrodden outcasts. One could be sure that he had his eye on the dollar in the bargain. But so far, I couldn't see the dollar.

In fact, I hadn't even seen Marsch since I had turned serpent. I wasn't sure that he had come through alive.

A few minutes later I was looking down through the triple-tiled ventilators at the other end of the row of five mounds, and there he was—Ernest Marsch in person.

His cigar smoke had led me to him. Through the rain-washed air the aroma had reached me, and I had moved along through the night's darkness until I had come to what was apparently his own Masha headquarters.

He was pacing, smoking, waiting impatiently. Around him were a few earth men—three who had come today, and a few from the ship that I had piloted.

"The girl should be here soon," Marsch said, glancing at his watch. "We need her to put the assembly over. The whole Masha gang will trust us if she'll say the right words."

"They won't trust us very long," someone said. "Not after we take off."

"We don't give a damn about that," Marsch snorted. "Just so we get them aboard the ships. Hell, as soon as we're out in space it makes no difference. Before they ever wake up to what's coming, we'll have them unloaded and *sold as slaves.*"

Nobody seemed surprised to hear these words. The men were all in on a well-organized scheme that was just about to come off. They talked of lining their pockets well, and Marsch assured them that the interplanetary market where these slaves were to be dumped didn't pay off in peanuts.

There was a little sentimental talk about Pete Hogan, who had had the hard luck to fall over the precipice when my ship had dropped us here. "Poor Pete," Marsch said, "he should have got in on this gravy. He was the best yes-man I ever had." But Pete had fallen into the depressed river, just as I had done, and the conclusion was he'd changed into a fish. Now I re-

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called that several pygmies had been at work, during my first hours of consciousness on this planet, trying to get something out of that deep stream. Marsch had failed to recover his lost mate—but I had got my first pygmy dinner out of the deal!

They spoke of losing a pygmy in their attempted rescue.

"Who was that devilish serpent?" someone asked.

"Probably my pilot, Bob Garrison," Marsch said. "I'll rest easier when I know they've run him through the lab and scoured his bones. He was a trouble-maker. I think he had his own scheme in coming here. He wanted to rescue Dr. Hunt."

"From what I hear, there's no chance of that," one of the newly arrived men said.

"No, not as long as the *White Head* keeps both of the doctors under his thumb," Marsch said.

There was something about the way he intoned the words, *"White Head."* Instantly I thought of the shadowy white skull I had glimpsed in my spree of eavesdropping in the laboratories.

Marsch added, "Have no fear about our plan, as far as the *White Head* is concerned, gentlemen. As I have assured you, *he plays both sides of the fence*. I have his complete approval."

THROUGH the darkness I had been hearing other voices. A party was approaching this earthen city from somewhere down the valley. Within a few minutes the footsteps were thudding softly through the underground passages and presently they came into Marsch's headquarters. It was a party of pygmies—I recognized Padderman and Jallan whom I had once encountered on the fortress roof—and they brought with them Flora Hessel.

"I told you we'd succeed," one of them gloated.

Marsch complimented them and dismissed them. Then he and his guests viewed the prize that stood before them: beautiful, black-haired, dark-eyed Flora. Her face was tilted upward in a characteristically proud pose, and I could read her fearlessness in her firm lips.

Marsch stepped up and put his hands on her shoulders as if he possessed her.

"Well, well, so you've finally come back to the right camp. My little sweetheart is all dressed for a party, isn't she?"

She was wearing a fragile pink and white dress that must have been a gift from someone at the fortress. She responded to Marsch's approach in the manner of a prisoner rather than a sweetheart.

"Relax, relax," Marsch said. "You're among friends."

Having introduced the other members of his party, he proceeded to go over his plans step by step. But his story was somewhat altered for Flora's benefit. He said not a word about pressing the Mashas into slavery. Oh, no, nothing like that. He was going to take them to a new planet and allow them to start a new colony. It all sounded very beautiful.

And all that Flora needed to do was help get them in the mood to accept his magnanimous offer.

"The four space ships are all ready," and he winked with pride over his cleverness. "At dawn—"

I was gathering fever over these cross-currents of deception, and was probably uttering serpent profanity when I was interrupted by a slight tap on my arm. I almost jumped off the mound.

"Move over," came a tiny whisper in my ear. "I want to see, too."

"Kipper!"

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"In person. Pleased to meet you."

"What are you doing here? They'll brand you."

"I had to keep an eye on our lady friend," he whispered. "How'd I know you'd already be here?"

"Listen," I said. "There's a devilish plan afoot. Do you know about it? Get an earful!"

We both listened. Marsch was pouring it on thick, and I didn't know but what Flora was eating it up.

"You'll speak to them at the assembly," he was saying, "so they won't doubt our promises. The main thing you have to do is look honest—and how could you miss? Give them a pep talk on running their own kingdom. Tell them they'll grow into strong men again. *Strong men*—that's the angle. *Let them think they'll have a chance to fall in love with a beautiful woman like you.*"

Flora answered with the edged tone of sarcasm.

"Shall I promise them *female companions*, like you promised me on the trip? How is your supply of terriers, Mr. Marsch?"

"Ha-ha-ha-rrrhuh. Yes, er—just a little joke, gentlemen. Don't mind Miss Hessel, gentlemen," Marsch said hastily. "She's always clowning."

CHAPTER XIX

I WANTED to hug Flora for what she had just said, and I might have if I hadn't been a serpent.

Under the conditions, all I could hope for was to let her know somehow that she had friends up here on the mud roof. The simplest way to let her know was to put my nose to the ventilator and breathe deep.

"*Sssssss!*"

"What's that?" said one of the men, looking up sharply. I knew he couldn't see anything through the blackness above the ventilator. But Marsch went pale and moved back.

"Was it pygmies?" someone asked. "We'd better not be overheard."

"It's not pygmies," said Flora, in a tone that comforted me. "It's only a breeze from the river."

"We'd better get on with the assembly," Marsch said abruptly.

We went down into the Masha world together. Kipper and I. I think I would have gotten lost if I had gone alone. The tunnels were endless. Most of them were not lighted. But the Mashas knew their way from an almost instinctive sense of direction, and Kipper, like the others, had been here for most of two centuries.

He straddled by neck and clung tight and whispered the directions in my ear. Part of the time we moved along at a gallop. Part of the time I couldn't use my legs because the ceilings were so low, and then we squirmed along the earth in traditional serpent fashion.

"All foot tracks lead to the assembly," Kipper would say whenever a lighted room showed us the tracks of those who had gone before.

"It won't be an assembly if they see me," I said. "It'll be a stampede."

But Kipper assured me that he'd get me into the underground chamber without creating any undue disturbance, and he made his promise good. We crept in by way of a shelf of natural rock about ten feet above the level of the Masha path, and there we huddled, within full view of the torchlights.

Several hundred little pygmies were thronged before us, looking across the cavernous chamber toward a cubical baked-mud platform. They were being swayed by Marsch's eloquence.

Waving his arms and shouting like a politician who is about to save the

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country with promises, Marsch brought his speech to a ringing conclusion.

"When the sun sets tomorrow night, you Mashas shall again be a proud people. The battle will be over, and you will be in possession of this land that is rightfully yours."

The hundreds of pygmies applauded with shouts.

"No longer will you be outcasts of space—fugitives from the earth and from Mars. You will be masters of your own destinies. And as for the scientists who have invaded this realm, they will be your servants, and with their own serums you shall make them slaves who will do your bidding!"

When the applause quieted, Marsch helped Flora Hessel to the platform. She stood, looking over the multitude of torchlighted faces, and somehow I knew she wasn't going to say what Marsch had wanted her to say.

The Mashas, waiting for her to speak, believed that they were about to attack the fortress.

BUT Flora believed that they were going to be put aboard ships, not for battle, but to seek another planet for a new colony.

Why had Marsch shifted his stories? She must have wondered. Was there still another plan?

"Even Marsch doesn't know," Kipper whispered to me. "*He* thinks his ships are going to take them off to be sold as slaves. But he's going to be fooled."

"How do you know?" I said. "Isn't he all set?"

"He thinks he is, but he's overlooked one important fact. There's a more powerful trickster in the game—the *White Head.*"

Flora was starting to speak. It was a breathless audience.

"I have been brought all the way from the earth to speak to you," she began slowly. "On the earth I have helped many people who are trying to regain a solid grip on life. Mr. Marsch has told me that you consider yourselves outcasts, and he thinks that you deserve some sort of victory to salve your injuries from two centuries ago."

"Yes! Yes!" Half the crowd jumped to their feet, waving their arms and shouting in a fervent affirmative.

She quieted them, "As I was about to say, *I do not agree with Mr. Marsch.* I think you have your own good world here, and I think it is childish for you to nurse your injuries of long ago. I think that Mr. Marsch and your own leaders are doing you a disfavor to stir your old resentments—"

A volley of boos thundered through the room—a chorus that Marsch and his associates joined. They shouted her down, and she stood there, facing them. She had said all she dared. They would have mobbed her if she had said more.

But just at that moment, as Marsch was moving up to the platform shaking his fist at her, someone entered from a door just beyond, and his entrance stunned the mob into silence.

It was the *White Head.*

He was mostly skull, all right—and that was the way I had remembered him from before. A barrel-sized white skull growing out of a keg-shaped body.

From neck to toes he was dressed in a skin-tight green silk costume. Dark green, yet shining. His arms were short blocks of muscle and his feet were like a lion's pads. He gave an impression of fearful power—an unworldly power that was *a strange blend of life and death.*

As he moved closer to the platform, I thought his huge white skull was almost luminous. Its light cast a pallor over Flora's face. Perhaps no one

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noticed that she climbed down and moved back into a corner. That ghastly white skull held everyone's eye.

The rows of huge white teeth parted, and the deep, hollow translucent eyes seemed to be taking in the face of every person in the crowd.

The White Head paused beside the cubical platform, and when he extended his arm to press against its side it collapsed into a little cloud of dust and was gone.

The surrounding torchlights grew dimmer, and the great skull grew brighter, until there was nothing in the whole room except deep shadows and a glowing white skull.

The skull tilted and turned, and its jaw moved and it spoke.

"Come." That deep-cistern voice filled the whole underground world. *"Come. The ships are ready. The time is NOW!"*

CHAPTER XX

I WOULD have depended upon Kipper in that moment, but Kipper was gone. What was about to happen was more than I could conjecture. But somehow I knew that Kipper was right, there was a more sinister plan on foot than Marsch's scheme of converting Mashas into slaves.

The Mashas were following in double time, running down through the black tunnels to the concealed plaza where the ships were supposed to be ready for the take-off.

The White Head had stood beside that exit, pointing the way, and Marsch himself had led the procession. With him had gone the full-sized officers who were, as I knew, pilots for the ships. But before half of the assemblage of pygmies had joined the rush and disappeared through the tunnel, the White Head raised a hand to hold back the rest of the crowd. There would not be room for all at this time, he had said. And with that he had disappeared down the exit after the last of the procession.

I wanted nothing more than to go to Flora and give her a safe ride back to the fortress. But would the fortress be safe? Whatever the White Head's scheme might be, or Marsch's, it was a cinch there were going to be some angry pygmies as soon as they discovered that this whole movement didn't lead to a direct attack. They were ready for power, and heaven help any man or god or demon of death that might stand in their way.

The torch lights flared up as I was creeping down through the remaining crowd. The pygmies began to scream. It wasn't like a roomful of women screaming, it wasn't like anything but a roomful of Mashas screaming. They scattered out of my path, shooting at me and throwing stones. They would have brought the roof down on themselves and me if they could have done it.

But I reached Flora, and the fright faded from her face at the sight of me.

"Thank goodness!" She was already running, motioning me to follow. "Hurry. If anyone can do anything, you're the one."

"What's happening?" I chased after her, and in a moment we found an opening up into the outdoors. "Where are we going? Do you know?"

She climbed on my back, slapping me first on one side and then the other to direct me as we snake-galloped across the rolling mounds.

"I should have known that Kipper's hunch was right," she sang in my ears as we whizzed through the night breeze. "See, over where that tiny red light is? That's where it's happening. That's where the ships are supposed to fly out."

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We were making the right kind of progress in the right direction, and a truck would have had to go some to keep pace. I only hoped that the mounds wouldn't cave in under my beating feet. They were frequently breaking through with a heavy thump as my hind feet kicked away from them.

"The ships aren't flying yet," I puffed. "Maybe there'll be time."

"The ships won't fly!" Flora said. "That's what Kipper tried to tell me. He's sure—"

"Why not? What's the game?"

"It's the White Head's game. Not even Marsch knows. Marsch believes—"

"When did you see Kipper?" I demanded.

"When? What's the difference!"

"Are you sure Kipper IS Kipper?"

It didn't sound like I was making sense, but suddenly a cold suspicion shot through the length of me and all at once I was slowing up so fast that Flora had to cling to my neck for dear life. I stopped, turned my head, and tried to face her in the dark.

"What is the matter with you?" she cried. "Go on. It's White Head's crimes we want to stop. He's not putting those pygmies on ships. He's pouring them into the transformation waters—concentrated water that will get them, for sure. Kipper said so. He's going to run them through the vat, and right down into the de-composing mill that will eat their flesh right off their bones. As fast as they change into new forms, he'll catch their skeletons. It's a regular skeleton's assembly line, I tell you. *Why don't we go? Are we going to let Kipper fight it alone?"*

My retort must have made her too weak to say anything more, but the wild suspicion had flared up through me, and I had to say it.

"I think it's Kipper that's double-crossing the whole gang of us! *I think Kipper IS the White Head!"*

"Go! Please go!" That's all Flora could say. I thought she was fainting. But I obeyed. With my two serpent eyes fixed on the growing red light I flew into top speed and raced like a ship through space.

CHAPTER XXI

AN ASSEMBLY line for polished skeletons—that's what it was!

We found our way into a lower level, by following the guides of sight and smell and sound and feeling. Especially sound. I had learned to put an ear to the ground, and catch the directions of the throbbing vibrations that beat faintly through the length of my body. With sounds beating from many directions, I was soon convinced that the procession was finding its way down, and down, through certain subterranean channels that were alive with electrically powered apparatus.

And now Flora and I followed a dark tunnel that promised a flare of amber light around the corner. We heard the gentle hum of machinery. We crawled, on and on, Flora pressing down close over my shoulders to dodge the arched ceiling, and I dragging my arms and legs. At last the tunnel curved into a high-ceilinged chamber whose orange rock walls gave the amber glow to the string of white lights beyond.

Whiter and whiter the way became, and louder and louder the rumble, until, presto, through the open doors we saw it with our own eyes. *A train of freakish skeletons.*

I haven't the heart to describe these strange monstrosities. No two were the same. Very few presented any semblance of balance or symmetry. A hundred highly varied monsters, if sliced

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into several parts and reassembled with each other by accident, couldn't have matched this weird pageant of bones.

The line was moving slowly—slowly enough that one might count ten before the next skeleton emerged from the black circular opening at our left.

"The pygmies—transformed!" Flora said in an awed tone. "They're walking into it, one after another, thinking they're on the way to the attack!"

We plunged ahead, up the stairs, across a balcony, up another stairs, over a catwalk, down a ramp—we were like a pair of bullets ricocheting between walls. In the back of my mind I was marveling that someone or something had organized enough pygmy slave labor, in secret, to construct such an elaborate set-up. Yet I knew that *if* my friend Kipper *was* the White Head, he had been here for long enough time to accomplish seeming miracles.

Whoever had done it, that powerful person had had the patience to wait, and to keep the secret air-tight, until the magic waters of this region had been converted into something so potent that even the Mashas would fall victim. And rather than let the secret leak out to Masha Land, he had devised a scheme for putting a large share of the population through with one swift stroke.

In my heart I was sick to think that the White Head must be Kipper. I compared the size, mentally, of the two creatures. Without the huge skull, the White Head's body would be the size of Kipper's. The skull might be a mechanical contrivance, in spite of its seemingly perfect operation. Or it might be the real thing—who could tell in this land of quick changes?

As to the time that I had seen the two creatures, I could not recall any instance of having seen both at once.

Then there was Kipper's unusual versatility of manner. He could easily have several voices, with a skull to aid his resonance. And he had seemed a person of such self-confidence, as if he went his own way, carried his own purposes in deep concealment, and feigned an outward manner of light-heartedness.

And yet they certainly would have touched the hot brand to Kipper that night if I hadn't come along. Would he have taken it? Or would he have changed instantly into the White Head and bowled them over with some show of power?

"We'll find the White Head up this way!" Flora said. "One more stair, and through that narrow copper door. *Kipper told me!*"

"Maybe Kipper *showed* you!"

I SAID it angrily, spitefully. Something told me that if Kipper knew his way all through these mysteries, he was a part of this sinister world, no question about it.

"Are you angry with me because I want to help Kipper stop these atrocities?" Flora said. She swung off my back and stood there on the step, glaring at me. My words had stung deep. The light glanced off the copper doorway just above us, and it glinted in her eyes dangerously. We were both panting, and all at once I could hardly speak for anger. But I managed some savage words.

"*How* do you know all about this? How does *Kipper* know—"

"All right, I'll tell you," she said. "*Kipper is the grandson of the White Head.* He told me so. They were shipped from Mars together. The White Head was the only one who was transformed by the waters. Kipper said he was more sensitive, more delicate, and less adapted to the conditions of Mars. He was a scientist, and he

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discovered that these Space Island waters, saturated with the strange qualities from certain blossoms, could cause all sorts of physical miracles. So he went to work . . . and he became the real power . . . feared and respected like a god. . . ."

"You're sure," I said, "that this is not Kipper you're talking about?" Something was easing in the long, long chain of tensions through my backbone.

"Kipper told me. Yes, I'm sure. And all these years Kipper has kept watch, not knowing what his grandfather was planning, being afraid to tell, and worrying because he didn't dare—"

We pushed through the narrow copper door.

The thick, sickening perfumes of blossoms filled my serpent nostrils and for an instant I staggered backward.

The waters were rushing through a sluice. Dark green waters. Deeper in color than the waters of the depressed river. Thickened waters that reminded me of the greenhouses at the fortress.

One after another, the pygmies were dropping down from an open shaft above the sluice. They fell, kicking and screaming. The sluice was deep, and before they could scramble to the surface they were carried on down, out of sight, to one of the lower levels.

"Can you make the leap?" Flora cried to me.

She pointed to the platform on the other side of the sluice. A fight was going on over there. It was an unfair fight, and it wasn't going to last long. Kipper had a steel bar in his hand. He was trying to slam the White Head over the crown. One telling blow struck. The White Head gave an ugly laugh through his immense white teeth. He had only to fling his hand at Kipper. Kipper would fall back to his knees.

It was only a twenty foot leap, over the water and over the heads of the struggling Mashas. I caught the opposite side of the sluice with my good hands and whipped my tail against the green waters. Then I came up, fast and strong, and ran toward the fighters.

With one hard fling of his hand White Head knocked Kipper off into the water.

I sprang to the edge of the sluice, reached a hand toward the little fellow as he floundered. *My arm wouldn't straighten.* I missed him. I caught a glimpse of his fighting face, his gritting teeth—he went on down, then, with the other Mashas.

The White Head was coming at me.

"The switch!" That was Flora's cry from across the way.

As White Head closed in on me, I felt one muscle after another go paralyzed through the left side of my body. But I had caught Flora's shout, and I saw what she meant. I whipped my long tail at the wall and struck a row of switches —struck them *off!*

The pygmies ceased to fall from overhead. I had evidently closed the hopper. Now there would be a chance for someone up there—Mashas or otherwise—to discover what had been happening.

The waters stopped churning, too, and that seemed to mean that the flow of bodies down into the flesh-stripping mills would stop.

It all happened in a flash, and not for one split second did I have any rest from the White Head's attack. He was putting a freeze on me, but I was walking into him with a good right arm. I flung a blow at his throat.

His mighty skull pinched down on my hand just as I struck. For an instant we hovered on the edge of the sluice as we both fought for footing. But the weight of my paralyzed side threw us over. We fell in together, kicking and striking and biting, and

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then, as we slipped down through the waters into some lower level I was sure we were locked in a death struggle.

CHAPTER XXII

"I'M THE serpent. *He's* not the serpent! *I'm* the serpent!" I had started to climb up over the edge of the circular tank, in which the waters were still spinning like a merry-go-round. And as I came up, I saw that Kipper wasn't following me; he was running from me. *He was going toward that—that forty-foot green-and-purple serpent!* I yelled at him. He was taking it to be me, thinking it was a friend. But he was making a mistake. *"No! Come away from him! I'm* the serpent. *I'm* Bob Garrison—over *here!"*

He turned his fighting face toward me for just an instant. Couldn't he understand? How could anyone have understood. I hadn't realized, myself, for a moment, just what transformation had taken place.

But as I intoned the words, *"Bob Garrison!"* and heard the deep rumble of my voice echo through *the huge skull that I now possessed,* I realized.

In the waters we had been transformed. In our fight, the shock treatment had done its work. And now—*I possessed the body of the White Head.*

And there in the tank, lashing its ugly tail through the green waters, was the power of these weird laboratories—the power that *had* been known as the White Head—now in the guise of a legged serpent!

Kipper saw what had happened—just too late.

My words told him, and he was quick enough to know—poor guy—but not quick enough to escape. The big jaws of the serpent closed over his head and snapped the life out of his body in one hard stroke.

I shall never forget Flora's scream. She simply couldn't believe her eyes. On the instant I was shot through with remorse for all the suspicious things I had said about Kipper. Would she ever believe that it wasn't I who took his life in that awful moment?

I have no pangs of remorse over what I did, very soon after the echoes of Flora's scream had died away.

First making sure that no more Mashas would go through the transforming waters, I turned the switches on again and allowed the serpent to go on through. I remembered that a pedestal had already been prepared for him—that is, for me—and I believed he would look well upon it.

Then I turned to the very weighty responsibilities that awaited me.

It was not as difficult as you might think. The greatest advantages were mine, I soon discovered, because I was the White Head, and there was no one, not even a learned doctor, who did not fully respect my slightest whim. If anything, I was going to have to be very careful not to overplay my power and arouse suspicion.

A word to Marsch and his officers from me convinced them that the flights into space which they had planned would have to be postponed until the Mashas had had more chance to work out some plans of their own. I was inclined to agree with Flora that they had a good world of their own right here, where their lives might go in forever, pleasantly and harmlessly; but if some of them wished to venture forth to other planets and start a new colony after due consideration, I would see to it that Marsch and his men would make their promises good.

My attendants at the fortress found comfortable rooms with bars on the doors and windows for Marsch and his officers, pending the Mashas' decisions.

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THE bars on the door made it possible for persons who felt sociable to stop and say Hello to Earnest Marsch now and then, and to bring him a cigar, if they wished. And some of his visitors learned in time to ask if he wouldn't like a female companion, and couldn't they bring him a little terrier dog for company?

It took me several hours of most earnest talking to convince my one confidante, Flora, that I was not the White Head, but was still, at heart, a very friendly serpent; and that I could even remember the time when I had been Bob Garrison.

"You do seem to be Bob Garrison," she finally said, as we lunched together on one of the fortress porches. "And you certainly aren't acting like the White Head."

I tried to smile through my enormous teeth, and I felt that the light of my great hollow eyes made a slightly terrifying effort to glow warmly.

"Believe me, Flora, I am Bob Garrison, and I remember every moment of our space-ship journey together. Believe me, I fell in love with you on that trip, and one of these times—"

"One of these times, *what?*"

"After I've solved a few of the problems that only White Head's power can solve, I'm going to dissolve myself in the green waters and come back to normal. So don't go 'way."

"Problems to solve? You're the master mind, now, aren't you?"

"I'm taking my time," I said. "You see, there was a rather serious split between Dr. Hunt and Dr. Winston, and now that I've come into this curious power, I can understand it. The White Head forced his will over both men, and he set up a distrust there which was positively vicious. I can't just go to these men and say, 'Dr. Hunt, Dr. Winston is really your loyal friend.'"

"Why not?"

"Because if I did, they would both think that I was again forcing my will upon them, trying to create an untrue friendship. No, it will take time, but they'll work it out. I know they will, because I've withdrawn that wedge that White Head planted. . . ."

We looked down over the edge of the porch to a plaza below, and there we saw the two doctors starting off on a stroll together.

Dr. Hunt was speaking, and we caught a fragment of his conversation. "I think I understand what you have on your mind, Dr. Winston, but it will do us good to talk it over. I've been thinking I'd go back to the earth sometime soon, now that everything seems to be smoothing out. But first I hope that you and I can reorganize our program here . . . I mean, reorganize it from the ground up."

"Or from the river up?" said Dr. Winston with a toss of his head, looking very much like a king.

I turned to Flora and nodded my huge skull. They were back on a solid footing, all right. There would soon be a constructive scientific program rising out of the discarded skeletons of the old.

"It's going to be an interesting world around here as time goes on," I said. "A little less weird, perhaps. And a little less human, with poor Kipper gone."

"Much less human without Kipper," Flora said quietly.

"And it will be pretty terrible after you go back to the earth. Will you be leaving here and going back one of these days?"

Flora smiled. "I've been in love with Bob Garrison for a long time . . . I think I'll stick around and see what happens."

The End

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THE VANISHING DOCTOR

★ By CHARLES RECOUR ★

ONE of the most celebrated disappearances on record, and one of the most famous in Europe, is that of Dr. Ferenc Boslav. European newspapers often bring it up and rehash it for the benefit of their "Sunday supplement" type of readers. In spite of this, the case makes interesting reading. The files of a number of Budapest newspapers have almost rooms devoted to the matter. In its way it was a little *cause celebre.*

Dr. Ferenc Boslav was a famous and learned surgeon who was widely known in Europe for his superb work in elementary neurosurgery at the turn of the century. His work was discussed and published not only in Hungarian medical journals but in those of other countries as well. He was on the staff of the Austro-Hungarian Hospital in Budapest, had numerous consultation positions in other hospitals and, in addition, taught periodically at the University of Vienna. He was an honored, recognized man. He lived in a rather elaborate home in one of the most fashionable suburbs of Budapest, and in the social circles of his time was regarded as a lavish entertainer, a generous host, and in general, a good fellow, all around. He was happily married and had two children. In fact, it was at the birthday party of one of them that the incident was touched off.

It was hot and muggy in suburban Budapest on the night of July 11, 1907. The birthday party for Dr. Ferenc's daughter Alicia was in full swing and the orchestra brought from Vienna for the occasion turned many a merry waltz during the evening. The guests were smoking, eating, drinking, and talking, and of course watching the children at the party. Dr. Boslav circulated among his guests, playing the good host, and attending to their every want.

As was the custom at such a party, when the time came for disbanding, about 11:30, Dr. Boslav's wife sought him out in order to bid their guests good evening. At first she looked casually, but apparently the good doctor had disappeared. Enlisting the help of some friends and the servants, after some time, because she was beginning to get alarmed, Mrs. Boslav searched the house and later the relatively small garden of which it was a part. Nothing was to be seen of the man. When the guests had finally gone, Mrs. Boslav located the police, for she became worried over her husband's absence. Evidently she was unaccustomed to his sudden disappearance, though at first she thought he might have had an urgent medical call. A routine check of the hospitals and clinics proved that such was not the case. While she was worried she was not unduly alarmed until, in spite of the police, no trace of the missing man could be found.

It is almost impossible for a citizen at any time, particularly one of Dr. Boslav's eminence, to disappear without creating some sort of a furor. Dr. Boslav to all intents and purposes had vanished from the earth. His wife hired detectives, sought the aid of various police groups and other investigators, and all to no avail. Dr. Ferenc Boslav was gone. This state of affairs lasted for eleven days. Mrs. Boslav turned the city of Budapest upside down in an effort to find her husband. She had begun to conclude that he had been kidnapped and murdered, and his body hidden. For what she reason she could not imagine.

Eleven days after he had disappeared, Dr. Boslav suddenly and dramatically turned up. He was located by a policeman, walking down a street of moderate industry early in the morning. He was brought home at once for the policeman recognized him in spite of his ragged, torn and dirty clothes, his unkempt beard and lackadaisical manner. He acted as if he had had a spell of amnesia, as if he was in a fog. When asked where he had been, his only answer was, "They know, they know."

As soon as he had recovered and been cleaned up he was subjected to a vigorous questioning by all concerned. Nothing was learned. He could not remember where he had been, or he *would not* recall. He was in perfect physical shape, despite his dirtiness, and he repeated his stock phrase often. Gradually this ended and he became perfectly normal—his old self. He resumed his work and all went on as before. He never referred to the matter even at his death in 1918.

It is easy to say that he suffered a brief attack of amnesia, or that he had been temporarily kidnapped, or that he was out of his mind for a while. Yes, pat, simple explanations are available, but . . .

This odd fact was what brought on all the discussion and speculation. While still groggy for a number of days after his return, when questioned where he had been, Dr. Boslav's reply was invariably, "They know, they know." What was he referring to? Who were "they"? What bearing had that phrase on his disappearance and why did he repeat it so often? The Hungarian papers made much of this without an answer.

* * *

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The FIRE TRAIL

by OGE-MAKE

I walked up and up, on a pathway of flame . . .

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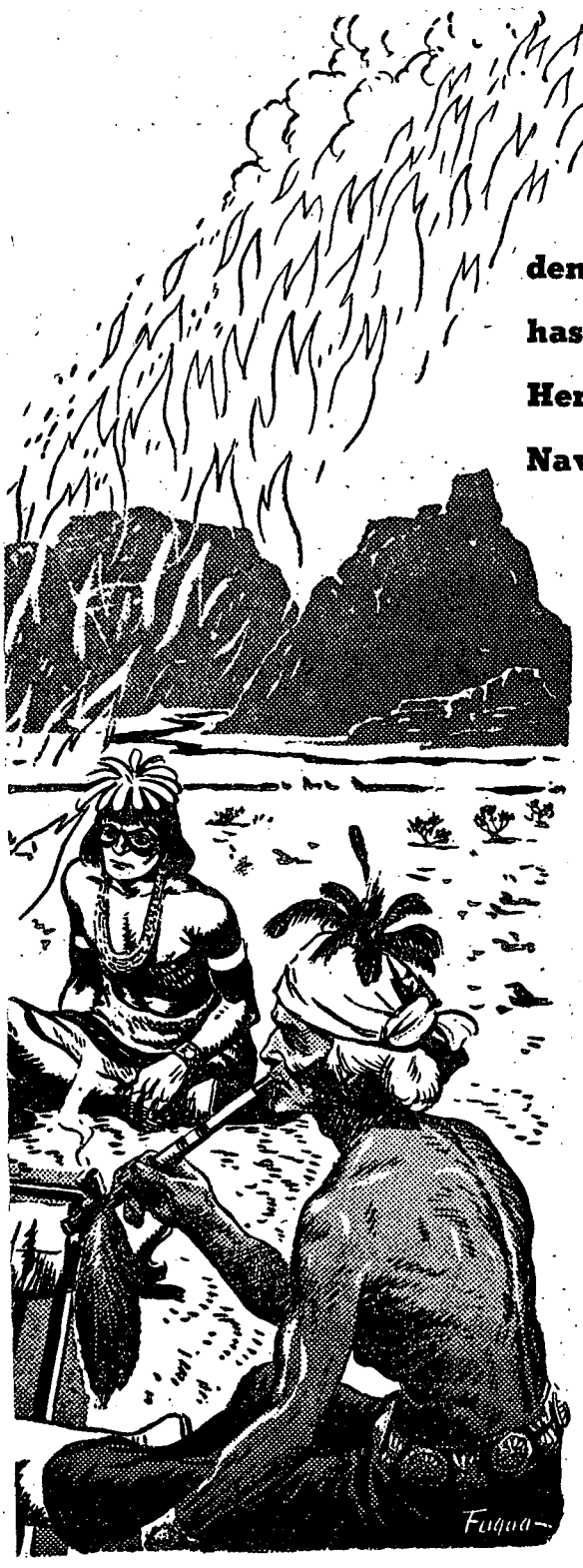

The American Indian has demonstrated many times that he has knowledge of a strange kind. Here is a true account of a weird Navaho ceremony and its result!

A SINCERE WARNING

IN THE following pages you will find an accurate account of what happened when Oge-Make walked the "fire trail" of the Navaho in the summer of 1947. To walk the fire trail is to leave your body during a trance and travel, not only through space, but through time. Many times the Navaho have conclusively proved they have this weird power—but this time they were trying to prove nothing; only obtain an answer to the grim problem that faces them this winter. Instead, to their disappointment, the walker of the fire trail brought back a message of vital importance only to the white man. Through our mutual friend, scientist L. Taylor Hansen, they have passed the message on to us. We pass it on to all Americans—and we believe it! Read it and think!

"YOU sent for me?"

I looked around the circle of lean, hawk-like, copper-skinned faces lit fitfully by the light of the campfire, and the thirteen pairs of dark eyes fastened on mine. The ceremonial blankets over the shoulders of these men blended into the star-dusted blackness of the night. Here and there a bit of silver or turquoise setting caught up the gleam of the fire. I repeated my question in a different phrasing.

"Word came to me through Running-Deer that I was wanted by the Elders.

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I left my classes in the University to come to you, my people. What is it that you wish of your pale son?"

A man rose from the circle and waved me to a seat on the desert sand. As I glanced at the spot I saw the lean, graceful, bending figures of a Navaho sand painting. I hesitated a moment. Was this a Navaho ceremonial? The Navaho have been traditional enemies of our tribe. What could this mean? Again the leader waved imperiously and I sank to earth on the sand-painting.

Then in the flickering firelight, I saw that the leader was my grandfather, looking more majestic than I had ever remembered him looking as the ceremonial blanket was gathered and held like a Roman Senator might hold his toga. Only the wind, playing across the wide expanse of fantastic desert land about us, accentuated the silence. Finally he began to speak:

"Yes, my son, we sent for you. I am going to reveal to you a secret of the past. The time has come when it is necessary for you to understand. I have brought you up from babyhood in the ways of my people. I have taught you the lore and ceremonies. You have been one of us. Even though you have desired to learn of the white man in his schools, yet in the summer times would you return to learn of us, and bring us the results of your mounting knowledge. That was good.

"You have thought yourself to be the unwanted babe of my daughter who eloped with a white man. I told you that to keep you one of us. The truth is that the river brought you to me during a flood. I never knew your parents. I had hoped that you might be part Indian but it becomes evident to all that your parents were white."

My brain whirled at this revelation, and I struggled to control my expression. Not my grandfather—this magnificent old warrior I loved so deeply? Not my people—these men to whom I felt such an inexpressible bond of affection? Not mine?

I searched each face. Behind the mask-like expression, I fancied the old affection I was so used to seeing still lingered undimmed. Yet I sensed trouble there, too. Those eyes were watching mine hungrily like children watching the eyes of a beloved leader. Then I saw the Navaho with their knotted-up hair. There were four of them. Their eyes were curious and not unfriendly. Yet they had a sort of haunted quality about them. Their blankets were ragged and their bodies were bags of bones. I swallowed as the significance of this hit my brain. Hard times must have struck these handsome, haughty silversmiths and weavers.

My grandfather's fine ascetic face drooped slightly in the firelight. Not that anyone could have suspected that droop but me. Yet I knew that this confession was not easy for him to make. I wondered why he was making it before all these men—including the strangers? As if answering my thoughts, he continued:

"Terrible times are threatening us all, my son. In our mutual danger, old misunderstandings are being forgotten. We are all Indians. First the Pueblos joined their councils, seeing that always one was in danger, though not ever the same one. Wassington* always threatened the lands of one of us by some bill. If we get enough people to stop one bill then they pass another. Now our brothers, the Navaho, are in trouble."

HE FOLDED his blanket around him and sank silently upon the earth. Then from his side of the fire a pitifully thin, shrunken old Navaho

* The Indian accent gives "Washington" a hissing sound.—Ed.

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arose. His quavering voice spoke in broken English and I wondered how much of my grandfather's speech uttered in melodious Keresian he had understood. After casting a tiny whiff of corn pollen to the four directions and blowing something into the fire, he began:

"Once Navaho strong people. Our ho-ghans dot plains. We ride for buffalo. Never take all animals—only old bulls or crippled cows. No Indian kill for fun—only white man. Buffalo strong, deer people strong, and Navaho strong. Then white man kill for skins. Leave buffalo rotting on plains. Many like sands rot on plains and make smell of death. Navaho know he must fight white man. We have no guns like he have. We have only arrow and stone hatchet—and great courage. We fight hard. No use against guns which kill far-off. Navaho rounded up in great red canyon of death. Soldier kill women and shoot little children. My mother and baby brother die. I hide in bushes and pray. Soldiers go way but one day find me hunting rabbit and send me on Long-Walk."**

I knew the old man was referring to the exile from which one-half of the tribe died. After a pause, he continued:

"I will not speak of Long-Walk. To Navaho it was time-of-greatest-sorrow. Many dropped to die in desert. But in time people come back to own lands, build ho-ghans again. Raise sheep. Catch some mountain sheep for strong wool. Forget Long-Walk. Weave rugs and white man buy. Make silver-work. People happy. Then come men from Wassington. Him say too much sheep on land. Mebby so. Mebby kill few, but Wassington send men to kill most all sheep. Wassington kill sheep when young men fight across waters. Now no sheep. No wool for blankets and Navaho hungry. What can we do?"

Then arose the husky figure I recognized as the head snake-priest of the Hopi. He spoke briefly of the bill which would have separated the Hopi from their corn fields,* but which was defeated. He ended with a bitter plea for the vote.

"Must only Indians and the insane be considered unfit to vote? Why are Indians classed with the mentally deficient?"

His language reminded me that he had once obtained a degree from a university. He was followed by a stranger who introduced himself as a Yee-Hat from Alaska. His plea was that against sacred treaty, the Alaskan Indians have just been separated from all their inherited lands. This bill was passed in the closing days of the '47 congress when debate was limited, and at the recommendation of the Indian Bureau! Before all this had time to fully impress itself on my mind, my own tribe was again speaking. The subject was the old nightmare of the dam.

"Why must New Mexico build her dam where the water will back up and cover the lands and sites of five pueblos? Some of our people have sworn to die in the rising waters which will cover our farms, our sacred pottery

** Long-Walk refers to the exile of the tribe following the massacre in Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto in 1863-64. It was at this time that General James Carleton of California Column renown had begun what he had chosen to call "The reduction of the Navajo." He was joined by Kit Carson and some 800 New Mexican volunteers. After the massacre, the tribe was rounded up and marched 800 miles to the east, to Ft. Sumner on the Pecos River. There smallpox finished the nefarious business that massacre had begun and only a pitiful remainder struggled back to Chinli and the "Red Canyons" in 1869, after the treaty of '68 had been signed.—Ed.

*The Bursum Bill. This Hopi Bill was attached as a rider to a veterans pension bill. Alert white "Indian Defense Club" of New Mexico rallied enough letter writers by lecturing women's clubs, to defeat it.—Ed.

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mines and kilns, and our dance places which were already ancient when white man first came to the land!"

After a pause, he asked the question in English: "Why is it always our lands or our animals? We Pueblos never made war on Wassington. Now they take our food by drowning our lands. These corn fields were ours before the memories of men. What can we do?"

Everywhere I looked, eyes were asking mine the same question "What can we do?" I wanted to cry out! To tell them it was not my fault! That I was just as helpless as they were! I wanted to shout: "Who am I? What can I do to stop this wicked march of greed?" But my grandfather had arisen and his voice was flowing out in the liquid tones of my own beloved Keresian Pueblo tongue:

"I know your thoughts, my son. You have not as yet learned to hide them well. Yes, we know you of yourself can do nothing. But tonight we are asking you to intercede for us. We have chosen you because you have white blood and know the way of the white man, yet your soul is ours. We are asking you to go to those who make your laws and learn from their minds if there is hope for us. We ask you to do this not in body, for we do not have the money to send you, but in the Indian way—in spirit. We ask that you walk the Fire-Trail!"

I GASPED at the shock of the revelation. The holy-of-holies reserved for medicine men—this adventure was to be mine! I began to remember the stories I had heard from childhood—how one man sent his spirit to Mexico and warned his son who had gone to trade turquoise, of the approach of Aztec slavers! I remembered the far more recent story mentioned in "Jungle Trails and Inca Ruins" of the medicine man who sent his spirit up the river to explore for the author and who minutely described the death of a chief in a distant maloka which the author himself verified some two months later when he had reached that point. I remembered the well-authenticated trip of Chief Seattle who described the city that later bore his name. Other cases flashed to mind. Sees-The-Living-Bull early in the contact of white traders saw the passing of the buffalo and the coming of short-haired spotted cattle—a description which must have bewildered his hearers who had never seen a cow. Many other cases flashed to my mind. Some had traveled in space only. Others had traveled in time.

"Will you go, my son?"

I nodded as I felt my temples throb with my rising pulse. Of course I would go, but . . . how could I be sure? Again my g r a n d f a t h e r read my thoughts.

"Since you are a novice and it is your first trip, you will not be able to guide your journey. Yet we must send you because our most able guides are aliens in this white man's world. There you are at home. We have sung the songs and said the sacred prayers for your journey. You will go forth. It may be that you will return with a message. Are you ready?"

"I am."

The medicine men of four tribes circled me, dusting me with pollen. My grandfather took a cup from one of the main medicine men and held it aloft in prayer. Then he came over and offered it to me. His mask-like face betrayed no emotion but his eyes seemed to smile courage into mine. Then returning to his place, he sank again upon the earth.

"Drink, my son."

I tipped up the pottery goblet and drank. The stuff was not too pleasant, but I allowed no reflections of distaste

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to cross my face.

"Now take the ancient peace pipe and blow the sacred smoke."

I accepted the old red sandstone pipe from the frail Navaho and exhaled the smoke to the four directions.

"Now, my son, stare at the fire while you chant with us the prayer of the Fire-Trail."

The drums which had begun softly, some time before, now arose to a crescendo and the throbbing chant began:

"Lord and Master of all the elements of life, from whence all came and into which everything goes, guide my footsteps upon the Trail-of-Fire. Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in beauty. Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in knowledge . . ."

At first I was aware that the fire had been ceremonially built. This meant that it had probably been lighted from flints struck into cedar shavings and carefully nurtured by cedar boughs placed in a crescent, twelve at a time, in groups of four. I was aware of the pleasant odor of burning cedar mingled with the scent of sage which drifted in on the desert wind, of the dancing flames and the cool sense of vastness.

Then my head began to throb, and the pulse of the drums began to be as a hammer on my temples . . . "Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in beauty."

Yes, the flames were beautiful—like swaying orange hands with purple nails —like expanding veils—like corridors —strange undulating corridors that grew and grew . . . They grew until I was walking upon their undulating color, until I was but a fragment of smoke carried high upon the emerald and violet veils that swept from a volcano. Higher and higher I was carried. Far below me, the mountain was belching forth lava and fire over what appeared to be a teeming jungle. Above me, the heavens were turning dark and the stars were shining out with a brilliance I had never before known.

IT SEEMED to me that my senses were never clearer, except for that of touch and its kindred sensations of heat and cold. I know that my mind never functioned more clearly, for I knew that I should go to Washington. Yet I was supremely elated with the spirit of adventure as I began to leave the earth. For it was quite evident to me now that I was leaving it. Furthermore, I seemed to be gathering speed. As the earth receded like a dwindling ball, it became also evident to me that I was retreating from our sun and our family of planets.

Immeasurable space surrounded me, as the sun which had been my day star retreated to the size of untold thousands of others. Ahead of me a giant sun of tremendous proportions loomed out and expanded. Yet it was soon also evident that the sun was not my destination, but a planet spinning around that sun. Then just as quickly as I had gathered speed, I swung around the planet twice with rapidly reducing rates, and at last began to flutter downward with a lazy side to side motion like a heavy snowflake.

I could not at first decide whether this was air or water through which I finally drifted, but decided it was atmosphere of a heavy variety since there was no surface difference which one would have encountered between a layer of air and that of water. Yet movements through this medium were slow, and the denizens seemed to have a fish-like quality about them, with graceful waving veil-like tails which apparently propelled them. As one of these creatures came toward me, I found myself wondering if I would be swallowed like a bug on a leaf, but apparently the monster did not even see

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me and lazily turned away.

Then came the giant plants with their magnificent, jewel-like flowers. The foliage blended from the palest of greens to a violet-purple. The trees were of a slender fern type, waving their fronds in the heavy air, although some huge sprawling leathery plants were also in evidence.

"This was Planet One in their year 50,050."

I looked around in surprise at the sound of this soft, well-cultivated voice. It came from a tall man dressed in a white toga, with the features of an Aristotle.

"I am your guide," he informed me with a smile. "Do not fear to talk out loud. We can neither be seen nor heard."

"Have they no senses of perception?"

"Yes, but not for us. We belong to another cycle. Let us leave the forest area. I shall show you one of their cities."

Then catching my arm, he pointed toward a clearing.

"A flight car is coming in. They leave workers to gather honey from the flowers and return in an hour or two to pick them up again. These people live largely on honey."

As he spoke a slight drone rapidly swelled to a roar and a great shining cigar-shaped vehicle came to rest. Out of it stepped some half-a-dozen creatures who strangely resembled our ideas of the fairy. Gauzy garments of extreme delicacy floated from the shoulders of the women, giving them an almost transparent beauty.

"How strange that these people should so much resemble those of earth."

"Yes, they do. And so does their destiny. However, at that point the resemblance stops. These people have already mastered not only their own planet but all the planets of their system. All are well-run gardens for the people of One."

He made a deprecating gesture.

"Of course, part of their more advanced condition is due to the fact that they discovered the value of fuels earlier in their history. And in part it may be due to the fact that being a more frail creature upon a larger planet than man in proportion to his birthplace, their intelligence was more advanced than man's when they began their conquest of their planet. But now it is the year 50,050. Remember that date. It is the hour of their destiny."

WHILE I was pondering over the meaning of these words, he beckoned me into the airship. We entered and found it a spacious affair. The engine room of the ship was in the nose and was set off from the rest by great glass panels, and many of the creatures were crowded along these panels to watch the working of the well-run engines. The rest of the salon was equipped with shining threadlike lounge swings and hammocks. Great flowers of jewel brilliance climbed a latticework. I decided that at least a part of the light which flooded the interior came from the walls, but not a small portion of it came from the pulsing color of these magnificent flowers.

As I turned to say something to my companion, I saw that the great sliding doors were closing and in a moment the ship was in the air with the forest becoming but a greenish blur far below us. We must have left the ground with a tremendous rush of speed.

"It is strange that we haven't more sharply felt the pull of gravity from such a large planet."

"The ship is insulated, as it were, with gravity nullifiers and giant internal springs," my guide answered. He

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walked toward one of the huge windows and I followed.

"This planet was once a heavenly place. The natural balance here was working splendidly. To offset a greater distance from its greater sun, than that occupied by Earth, there was a larger amount of internal heat. Thus the temperature was not much different from that of Mexico on Earth. But civilizations grow upon fuel. Like the people of Earth, these inhabitants first used their natural vegetable and mineral fuels. Nuclear fission came some time after their mastery of their own planet and its use was rigidly controlled. Radiation danger was kept at a minimum for thousands of years. There was no disastrous releasing here such as would have come with an atomic war. But look at the beauties of One!"

We were gliding in the heavy, bluish air through which the sun cast fantastic wavy shadows caught by the fern forests glimpsed now and then as the ship dropped down lightly to take on or leave off passengers.

"These creatures have never been carnivorous. As I said before, they live largely on the honey of these giant, luminescent flowers. The honey is syphoned into storage tanks along a part of the hull. Perhaps that partly accounts for the fact that they have never been too warlike—that is, up to now."

"They are becoming war-like? With whom . . ."

But I didn't finish. The ship again zoomed into the sky, but this time barely skimmed over the tops of the lacy trees.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. We are about to land at the First City of One. The First City is the world capital. Look ahead and you will soon see something glittering in that direction."

"Yes, I do!"

"Those are the massive glass domes of First City."

"Why do they build their cities under glass? To preserve the heat?"

"No. To keep out radiation. And they are not glass as we know it on Earth. This is a chemical compound of One. Radiation has been a growing nightmare here for many generations."

"How long is a generation?"

"It used to be several hundred years because life was so easy and pleasant, but it has been growing shorter."

"Why?"

"Radiation poisoning."

That statement had the effect of making my very stomach do a flip-flop. My thoughts flew back to my own studies in physics. I remembered Ernie, who had been on Bikini Atoll, and what he had told me of radiation poisoning. Of how the little fish infected the larger fish, whose death passed the infection to the algae which in turn infected the very ship hulls of clean boats. . . .

"Stop dreaming! We are landing and you are missing the sights. Remember that you will not pass this way again."

I CAME to myself with a start and stared around. The space ship had slipped through a great dome which had closed over it. From the air I imagine it must have looked like shining lips opened and swallowed the torpedo-like space-craft.

As the huge sliding doors of the ship again slid apart, I found myself looking upon immense cavern-like walls that glowed with a faint green light. These walls in which we found ourselves as we left the ship were in the shape of a globe, but almost immediately a part of them rolled back, revealing a purple and green forest lit almost entirely internally by the great

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light-pulsing flowers. And now I was due for a new surprise, for the diaphanous robes flowing from the shoulders of what I had supposed to be the women were in reality wings. These creatures had large wings of the iridescent type such as are used by the dragon fly of Earth. Simultaneously, I also made the discovery, as one passed close to me, that their bodies were covered with either a tight-fitting garment, or were covered with minute scales which gave the impression that their skins had been dusted in silver dust, whose metallic gleams caught every refraction of the light-pulsing flowers.

As the stream of people (for I still thought of them as people) entered the forest of flowers, fountains of water sprayed up from all through the forest, and these lovely beings spread their wings and fluttered through the water with every evidence of great enjoyment. The sight of them flying, turning and whirling was truly a thing of beauty, for as the flowers pulsed various colors, so the water drops and the bodies of these beings with their glittering wings all took on and reflected color until they seemed like living jewels.

"The rain-dance is a ritual with them. One must take it in order to enter a city. The reason is radiation. Water is the best methods of removing the poisons if recently acquired."

Must that man ruin everything? But my annoyance was short-lived. Another question was inserting itself into my mind.

"I suppose the large size of the raindrops is due to the small size of the people on this planet?"

"Right."

"And these ferns then are in truth not as tall as the Woolworth Building, nor the flowers as large as houses?"

"Probably not. Size is relative."

"Then we are not as large as we are on Earth?"

"If you had remained the same size you could not have made the trip to the Planet One and enjoyed the beauty of First City through the eyes of its inhabitants. Again I say size is relative. On Earth you have the correct size for your cycle, but you are being given a glimpse of another cycle through the eyes of its dominating civilization."

Almost nostalgically I remembered "Wassington," the manner in which the Indian accent distorts that word. To my surprise, my guide answered my thoughts.

"You are being given a message. Concentrate on what you see and hear and smell for the time grows short, and you shall not pass this way again. Nor indeed, shall any man, for this is the year 50,050."

His words had recalled to my mind another strange fact. It is true I could hear the splashing water, the hum of wings and many voices whose drone was not unlike the mighty notes of an organ. I could smell the damp smell of forest plants and the lighter perfume of flowers, but I could not feel touch of the water. Again my guide answered these unspoken thoughts.

"As you have been taught by the Elders of the Indian people, there are only four senses. Sight, hearing, smell and that fourth which some men call intuition. These are the senses of the spirit. The others are the senses of the body."

As he spoke, we moved rapidly through the great forest of the splashing fountains and light-pulsing flowers, to see other great doors ahead slide back. Through these doors a golden light poured in, and almost immediately the fountains died down, the symphony of a thousand voices was hushed and the shining swarm flew toward the opening. As we joined them, my guide said:

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"For the purposes of our visit we have been given an understanding of the strange language of One. A debate has been going on for many days. The arguments of both sides have been carried by television to all parts of One, and even to the colonies on their other planets. We are to come in for the finish. Space ships are bringing similar throngs from all the forests for all work is now being suspended, and in a moment the flower-forests of the sixteen entrances to First City will be filled with the returning throngs."

MAKING our way through the heavy air as did the others all about us on their gauze-like wings of dusted silver, now taking on the golden glow of the great domes, we circled over the city. The buildings were massive with hundreds of openings. They seemed to be made of mother-of-pearl or some other opalescent material that caught and reflected the golden glow of the great domes. The street-like canyons between the buildings glowed with their own light-pulsing flowers, and occasional fountains.

One great central structure, towering over the others, was apparently the destination of the throngs. With them we reached one of the openings and walked along a glowing corridor. This grotto or series of grottoes gleamed like a blue neon sign, and yet in a way, I was reminded of the corridors leading to the football stadium on the campus. I felt an air of expectancy, yet I cannot say that it was entirely a pleasant expectancy. There seemed to be a haunting dread in the back of the minds of these people. Talk had died down to a minimum murmur. Then we came into the amphitheatre of One.

Earth holds no possible comparison to its immensity. It must have held a million souls. One could barely see the stage in the distance as we took our seats with the others. For many moments we waited while yet other thousands took their places. From somewhere music was playing. Tinkling notes filled its long sweeping phrases, like the splash of the fountains of which the people of One seemed to be so fond. Phrases of the symphonic music, I noted, were accompanied by color changes in the immense dome and fainter whiffs of perfume. Did the symphonies of One coordinate the pleasures of the senses?

But the music was fading and the hum of voices was dying to an expectant hush. The colors which had been changing in the overhead dome, began to die down and what I had taken for gigantic curtains above the tiny platform in the distance began to glow with the image of a speaker.

"People of One, this day Seventy-Two of the Year Fifty Thousand and Fifty is the Moment of Destiny. For days we have debated the issues before us. We know that in the early days of nuclear fission when we were experimenting with the heaviest atoms, much radiation was released. We also know that subsequent generations have had to limit space travel because of the heavy radiation trails and even go back to more primitive fuels for our own planet's use. Now the sins of our ancestors are coming upon us. All of us, even in our generation, have noted the increasing heat of One. Yet the other planets of our system with whom we have friendly intercourse and trade are just not suitable for our continuing existence. We have all known for some time now that we must someday leave One. Our daily lives have become a nightmare of heavy infection. We have not gone unscathed either. In a minor way we are all infected even now with the death of One.

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"Our hope has been to get to another planet where our least infected children could survive. Our space fleet feels justified in recommending Planet X330 of Sun 32. The trouble is that this planet is infested with a civilized form of life which has the gunpowder weapon that it uses upon its own kind. To attempt to reason with such individuals would be absurd. To use the fission of the heavy atom would be equally absurd because we would immediately sow the seeds of radiation poison, which is *all* we are attempting to escape from here.

"Whether the people of One who have thus far made their way without the destruction which more savage creatures call war, is justified in now taking a planet by force, is the question. The people have voted for war!"

AT THIS point a tremendous demonstration of stomping and wing-flapping was drowning out the speaker. The face faded from the screen and another took its place.

"That is *not* the question. Because I do not believe in war I have been accused of having sympathies with these miserable creatures of Planet X330 who kill their own kind. Obviously they are still in a savage stage of evolution. Whether they would ever develop a civilization comparable to One if allowed to go their way without interference, is a moot question. BUT I do object to this new weapon developed by the military! This weapon uses for its fuel the tremendous force of the exploding hydrogen atom! I object to this because it is dangerous—even more dangerous than uranium radiation!"

Again the first face took the screen.

"My opponent has brought up the question of the new weapon merely as a means of diverting the thoughts of the people from this new war. If we do not take this planet, then where can we go? To still more distant, uncharted systems? We need living space and we need it immediately! Look at the freaks developing on One among the animals! Look at the new heat fissures appearing almost daily! Look at the new volcanoes! When the radium was first discovered we did not know about these deadly radiations. We did not know that these forces had to disintegrate before the planet could become habitable. We did not realize that we had unleashed a monster which would devour us. Since then, it is true that our experiments have become more and more controlled. We realize now that the core of our planet has become heavier through thousands of years of atomic disintegration, and that in spite of all our knowledge, we cannot stop the chain of fate. We must have the new weapon for the war. Then that war will be most devastating, but it will be over in a hurry, and the planet becomes ours!"

Again the slim face of the second speaker. The eyes had almost a haunted look of fear.

"When I plead for you to think twice about this new weapon I am not trying to divert your thoughts from war. I am pleading for our planet! Do you realize what makes a sun burn? It is atomic disintegration! And now with the hydrogen atom, we are stepping forth into a new field. Water is composed of hydrogen. So is our atmosphere. Shall we set fire to it? And if we do, can we stop it when we wish?"

A roar booed him down and I realized that he was p l e a d i n g a lost cause. Again he tried to speak, but a roar of jeers drowned him out. Then the first face came back with the light of victory in his eyes.

"I knew that you were too practical to listen to this prophet. Now for the promised experiment! None of you

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watching me shall ever forget this moment. Our civilization has reached a new peak in power! With this new and cheap fuel we can reach more distant constellations in one-half the time now required! We shall explore for more and more planets!"

For a second the opponent came back:

"And who is to say that other civilizations have not also sought this power and found DEATH? Remember that all begins and ends in FIRE." Then in desperation he pleaded: "I beg of you—do not do this thing. We still have a few years. . . . Remember that our greatest leader once said that two atoms should be sacred from experimentation—hydrogen and oxygen!"

In the jeers which drowned out his voice, I heard only those fateful words: "All begins and ends in FIRE!"

A tense hush fell now over the assembly. The opposition had said all it could and failed. The long-awaited experiment was about to take place. A general lowering the lights added to the sense of expectancy. I knew that these people of One had shouted down the voice of reason because they had so passionately wanted to believe the first speaker, yet the second really had them worried. No one could say for certain just how this experiment would turn out. Perhaps this half-cupful of water would drive a liner across the widest ocean, but what was there to prevent it from spilling over and exploding that ocean? I realized that in a way this choice was forced on them by their own desperation. They saw the cancerous spread of radiation poisoning with its heating effect—those things, when produced by nature, had to die out before a globe could become habitable.

My thoughts were interrupted by several men on the screen bending over what seemed to be a table. And then it happened. . . .

A TERRIFIC blinding white light on the platform etched for the space of a second, on the screen above, and for eternity on my mind, the horror in the half-dozen faces of the men making the experiment, before they disintegrated into light.

For the space of another second, that gigantic amphitheatre rocked with the screams of the doomed, as the explosion on the altar of science spread with lightning swiftness in all directions through the air. Then the swarming mass of living creatures were seared to powder as the vast domes crackled and burned in the swiftly mounting terror.

My companion and I seemed to be borne aloft like a particle of smoke on the conflagration which spread with unbelievable swiftness. It was as if the planet was a picture soaked in gasoline, to which some one had touched a match. The forests writhed like souls in agony, while between the burning trees long cracks appeared in the crust, through which poured the bubbling red planetary blood of lava. Then even these were blotted out in light as the flames became higher and hotter and whiter. I knew that they must have become hotter with the heat of a new-born sun, although I could not feel them.

Nor could I even see them so well, for I was speeding away with unbelievable rapidity. The Planet One, which had become a sun, still circled its greater day star, and as I watched its magnificent brilliance, I heard my companion say:

"That was the year 50,050 on the Planet One, but as for Earth, it was before—long millenniums before—the memory of man or beast."

"Then they were not speaking of Earth?"

"No. Earth would never have been

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available for the people of One. It was not large enough. We are now crossing over from the long cycle of the past—that past which might become the future."

"But One? Where is the Planet One?" I asked as I watched its fading brilliance becoming smaller and smaller with the increasing distance. Yet I could not take my eyes from its white beauty and its rainbow corona.

"Know you not of a small sun circling a larger neighbor? Know you not of a small sun with a heavy core such as might be expected from millenniums of atom-stripping?"

Of course! Sirius and its dwarf companion!

From the distance I heard chanting voices:

"Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in beauty! Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in knowledge!"

Perhaps I still had time to ask one more question.

"Will Planet One ever again become habitable?"

Through the chanting and the tom-tom, I heard the voice of my guide as if from an ever-increasing distance:

"There are some things which even I do not know."

Then the pin-prick brilliance of One became lost in the purple-tipped carmine of flame corridors upon whose smoke-veils I was lowered. . . .

"Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in knowledge."

And I found myself sitting upon the sand-painting while medicine men were sprinkling pollen upon my skin. My first words must have sounded very Indian, for I merely stated:

"I have returned."

Yet later when I told them my story, they did not betray the great disappointment which I know they must have shared. The only comment, given by my grandfather, was pronounced after due deliberation.

"We sent you out, my son, as a white man. As a white man have you returned. Your message is not for us. It is for that world of yours where you walk with such confidence. It is for white man. Go forth, my son, and deliver to that world your message."

THE END

AN EXPLANATION OF "THE FIRE TRAIL"

YOU have just finished reading a true story. We obtained this account of an actual "fire trail" ceremony which took place this summer in New Mexico from our good friend, L. Taylor Hansen, who is a good friend of the Navaho. He considered the "story" interesting material for us.

As we understand it, the ceremony is an ancient one and was attended by several different tribes; the Navaho, the Pueblos, Hopi, and even a Yee-Hat from Alaska. The man selected to travel the fire trail was to ask an answer to the problem of what to do about the threatened loss of lands, of crops, of food, and of other rights, due to several scientific and governmental projects in the area.

When Oge Make returned from his mystic adventure, he revealed that his "guide" had not taken him on a trip to Washington, to the Great White Fathers, to get the answer to their question, and to try to implant a correction in the minds of the White Fathers, but had instead taken him on an incredibly fantastic trip into space and into the far past, to a world circling Sirius. There he was given the message you have just read!

Your editors know it is true!

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PLIGHT OF THE NAVAHO

DURING July and August of 1947 the Navaho Indians in New Mexico were deprived of their means of livelihood by a series of unavoidable catastrophes and face extreme privation and hardship and perhaps even starvation this winter. The government order which contributed to this condition was for the slaughter of the herds of sheep which form the Navaho's sole support. The Navaho nation, up to now, has been entirely self-sustaining from its sheep-raising, rug-weaving and silverwork. Without sheep, they cannot obtain wool for rug-weaving; they cannot sell sheep to obtain money for purchasing silver; providing meat for food this winter will be impossible.

Perhaps it has been necessary to slaughter the sheep to conserve grazing lands from destruction, as has been suggested, or perhaps it is true that the action became necessary to prevent contamination among both Indians and Whites because of a diseased condition directly attributable to the explosion of the first atom bomb in the neighborhood, the effects of which are still being felt. Along those lines, we recently published a novel by Rog Phillips, called, "So Shall Ye Reap," which suggests a possible effect from the bombs already detonated and pointing to a disastrous effect if more are detonated. Certainly further experiments to obtain positive information as to just what effects the explosion of atom bombs have on our atmosphere, soil, climate, etc. should be carried out before any further work is done along destructive lines. However, that is another matter, already being very hotly argued by leading scientists. Right now the plight of the Navaho people is our concern.

We suggest two courses of action, to be taken by our readers in a purely humanitarian way. First, PLEASE SEND PACKAGES OF NON-PERISHABLE FOOD TO THE NAVAHO IMMEDIATELY, AND CONTINUE TO DO SO THROUGHOUT THE COMING WINTER TO HELP THIS HONORABLE INDIAN NATION'S PEOPLE THROUGH A CRISIS IN THEIR HISTORY. Second, *"adopt" an Indian child, and pledge yourself to support that child through the winter.* Really be a "great white father"! Either of these things can be done by addressing the following persons:

Chief Zhealy Tso, Chinle District 10, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Clyde Lyzer, Window Rock, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Howard Gorman, Window Rock, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Roger Davis, Window Rock, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Address your food packages to any one of these men, who will see that the packages reach those in most immediate need of help. If you care to "adopt" an Indian boy or girl for the winter, write to these four men, who will act as intermediary, or place you in direct contact with the child or child's family who will benefit by your assistance.

Let us, as Americans with a heart, show the Navaho that we do not intend to let hardship come to them, no matter what the reasons are for what has happened. Your editor for one, has "adopted" the first Navaho child and hereby pledges that child's support through the coming winter. Why don't you do the same?—*Raymond A. Palmer.*

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Gulick heard the sharp crack of Redding's gun, but he was not afraid of

The ISLE of DOOM

by Robert Moore Williams

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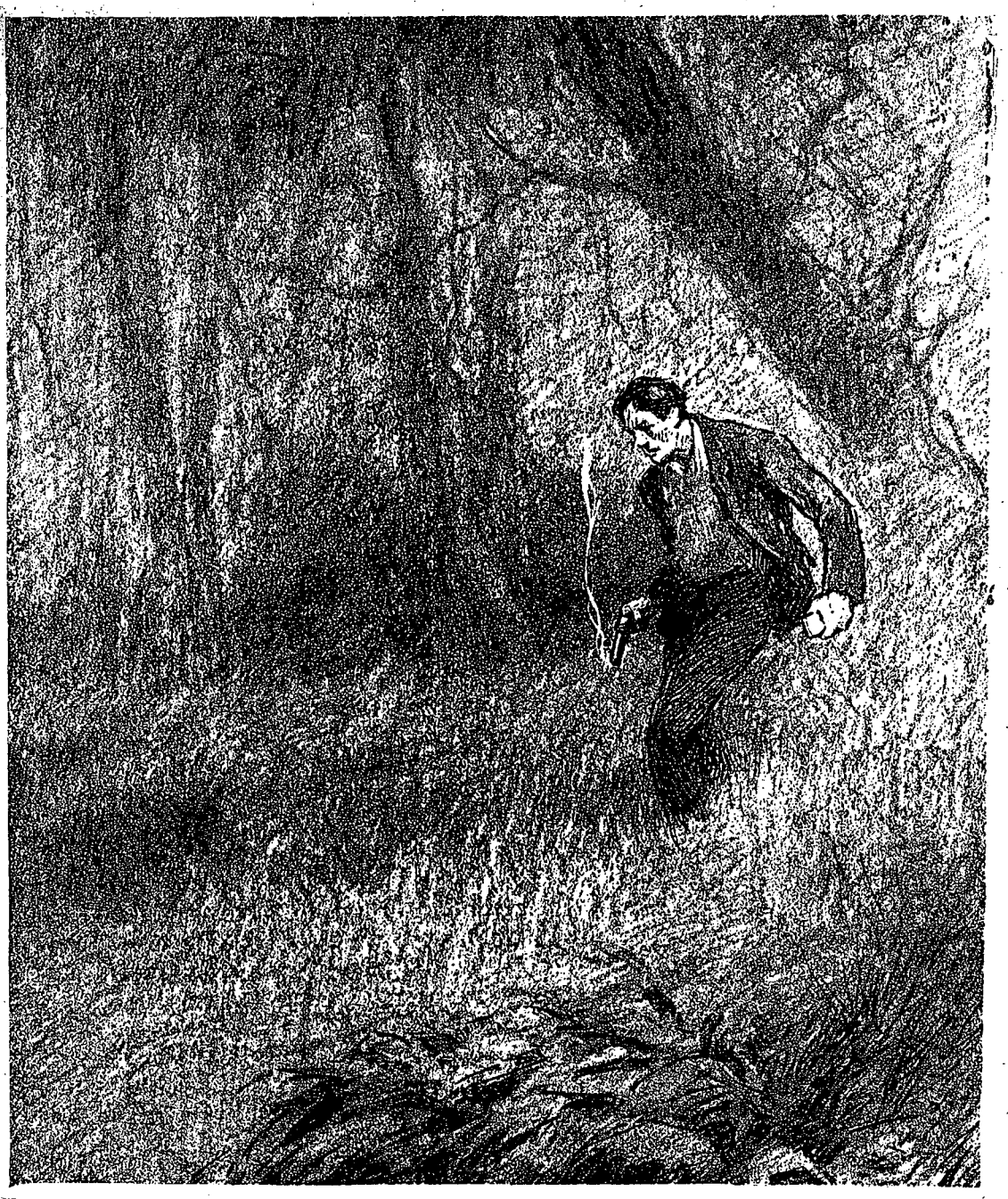

bullets at that moment—for the deadly mist balls were rushing for him.

They hung eerily over the swamp isle, strange balls of mist that looked harmless enough until they hurtled down—to kill...

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THE town of Tom's Landing, at the edge of the Big Cypress swamp in the Florida Everglades, looked like the thing it needed most on earth was a good hurricane to blow it to hell and gone off the planet. Mark Redding stood on the dilapidated board-walk that ran down one side of the dirt road that served as a street and looked at the nine wooden shacks that made up the residences in this community. The only living creatures in sight were a scattering of scrawny chickens visible under the house across the street, a lean hound dog that looked like he wished an alligator would catch him and save him the trouble of starving to death, and a razorback hog. Redding turned to look at the store. It was a single wooden building and it was ready to fall apart. Its back end rested on piles driven into the water. The launch that had brought him here across the swamps was tied up at the back end of the store and its garrulous owner was inside the building.

The faded sign on the joint said:

JENKIN'S STORE

Groceries, fishing tackle, dry goods, and snuff

A second smaller sign hung under the first one. The small sign said:

U. S. POSTOFFICE

Well, this is it, he thought. *This is the postoffice. This is the place I'm looking for.* He pushed open the door of the store.

As he entered the front door, the owner of the launch that had brought him here came in through the back door.

"Hi, Zack. Hi, Ned. How're you, boys?" the launch operator sang out to two men in the back of the store. "Seen any more swamp ghosts lately?"

The owner of the launch was kidding. He got a short answer for his efforts.

"Shut yer mouth, you danged fool!" one of the two men told him. "There's some things in these swamps that people who got any sense don't talk about."

Redding stepped into the room. At the sound of his footsteps, the two men looked up quickly. Their unshaven faces turned instantly blank when they saw a stranger. The behavior pattern of the swamps is the same as the hills: keep quiet when a stranger comes around.

The launchman recognized Redding. "Hi," he called out. "Here's my passenger. I want you to meet a couple of the boys. This is Zack and this is Ned. They're alligator hunters. That is—" He winked broadly at Redding. "—they hunt gators exceptin' when the ghosts run 'em out of the swamp."

"Hello," Redding said. The two men nodded, said nothing. One of them, Zack, glanced sideways at the launchman. If looks could have killed, the launch tied up at the back of the store would have been in need of a new owner.

The launchman was determined to have his joke. "They're a little sensitive about ghosts," he said, winking again at Redding. "But they're good fellers and if the man you're looking for is anywhere around these parts, they'll be able to help you out. Know every hole and gator hideout in these swamps, the boys do. Well, I gotta get that stuff unloaded. Can't stay here and talk all day."

GRINNING, the launch owner hustled into the back room of the store.

The two men eyed Redding. Their gaze went over his lean, bronzed face, took in the sport jacket he was wearing, noted his slacks, his sport shoes. They looked a long time at the beaten brown

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canvas bag he was carrying. Then Zack's eyes came back to the slack coat, searched for the bulge under the arm that would mean this stranger was carrying a gun.

There was no bulge under the arm. The gun was in the canvas bag.

"You lookin' for somebody?" Zack said at last.

"Yes," Redding answered.

"Who?"

"The postmaster."

"Oh."

"Either of you in charge of the post-office?"

"Nope," Zack said. "Ab Jenkins is the man you want. He's in back checkin' groceries."

"I'll wait for him," Redding said. While he waited, he looked around the store. The postoffice occupied a small corner of the room. The rest of the store was devoted to an amazing conglomeration of goods. There were cheap shoes, a barrel of salt pork, fish nets, gig heads, snuff, twists of chewing tobacco, bolts of calico, galvanized iron buckets, pencils, pens, tablets of writing paper, blue denim overalls, blue work shirts, and other items essential to the trappers and fishermen who lived in the swamp.

One showcase fascinated Redding. It contained a collection of fish hooks of various sizes, yellow candy made to resemble peanuts, boxes of snuff, sacks of smoking tobacco, a box of cheap cigars, shoe laces, pocket knives—and an expensive miniature camera with a price of $5.00 scrawled on the tag attached to it.

The camera had an imported F 3 lens. A light meter and range finder were mounted on the sides.

A camera like this would cost $200.00 in New York. Second-hand, it could easily cost $100.00. It was for sale in this store for $5.00.

Looking at the camera, something inside Redding began to turn cold. He knew what it meant to be cold. He had been cold on the Anzio beachhead, he had been cold in southern France, he had been cold in front of the Siegfried Line when an 88 was zeroed in on his platoon. All during the war—and he had seen it all—he had been cold. It was the same kind of coldness he felt now.

A step sounded behind the counter. "Something I can do for you?" a heavy voice said. Redding looked up.

Ab Jenkins, the postmaster and store owner, was a big man. A two days' growth of tobacco stained whiskers covered his face. He spat on the floor behind the counter.

"I'd like to look at this camera, if it's for sale."

For a second, Jenkins hesitated. His heavy eyes studied this customer. Then he shrugged, took the camera out of the showcase. "Everything in here's for sale."

Redding took the camera, turned it over and over, studied the lens and the exposure meter. He didn't give two hoots in Georgia about the lens and the meter. He wanted to see if there were two initials scratched inside the case but he didn't want to be in a hurry about looking.

"I'll buy it," he said at last. He took a five dollar bill out of his wallet. While Jenkins was putting the bill into the money drawer, Redding opened the camera, looked inside it.

SCRATCHED on the black enamel on the inside of the box were the initials J. R.

They stood for Jim Redding, Mark Redding's brother.

"Where did you get this camera?" Redding asked.

"A gator hunter found it on an island

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out in the swamp," Jenkins answered. "He owed me a bill and I took the camera as part payment."

"I see," Redding answered. He studied Jenkins. The store owner's face was impassive and revealed nothing. He might be lying. He might be telling the truth. Or his story of how he had obtained the camera might be part lie and part truth. Redding had no way of knowing.

"Anything else I can do for you?" Jenkins asked.

"Yes. You're postmaster, aren't you?"

A look of irritation crossed the storekeeper's face. "You ain't another danged inspector, are you?" he demanded.

Redding grinned. "No. I'm looking for some information on a man who mailed a letter from this postoffice on December 2, 1941."

"Huh?" The request surprised, startled Jenkins. "A man who mailed a letter here in 1941! Mister, that's five years ago!"

"I know it is. The man is my brother. I had a letter from him in December 1941 and I haven't heard from him since. I came down here to look for him. Here's the letter."

Redding took a big envelope from his inside coat pocket, opened it, removed a smaller envelope. The postmark, Tom's Landing, Florida, December 2, 1941, was faded but still visible on the small envelope. Redding laid the letter on the counter.

In the back of the room the two alligator hunters suddenly stopped talking.

Jenkins looked at the letter but made no move to touch it. "You waited five years to come lookin' for your brother," he said. The tone of his voice was an accusation.

"I was in the Army," Redding said. Bitterness crept into his voice. "They don't give you time off from the army to go looking for missing brothers. After I was discharged, I had to spend some time looking after my business. I got here as quickly as I could."

Jenkins listened in silence. He looked at the letter, found courage to pick it up. He turned it around in his fingers, studied the postmark and the address.

"I wouldn't have to see the man who mailed this letter," he said. "He might have come in here and dropped it in the box without my seeing him. Or he might have gave it to someone else to mail and never came in here at all."

"Then you don't remember my brother being in here?"

"I sure don't," Jenkins said flatly. His gaze went regretfully to the camera tucked under Redding's arm. That camera made him a liar and he knew it, but he obviously intended to stick to his story.

"He was a member of a scientific expedition," Redding continued. "There were two other men with him. One of them, Roger Nash, financed the trip. Did you ever hear of him?"

Jenkins shook his head.

"No?" Redding said. "The third man was Sidney Gulick. Did you ever hear of him?"

Sudden rage knotted Jenkins' face. "I never heard of any of them!" he shouted. "And if you want my advice, you'll go back where you came from and stop asking these damned fool questions. I ain't got any more time to talk to you."

He stalked out of sight into the back room of the store. Redding let him go. If Jenkins wouldn't talk, well, there were other people in the town of Tom's Landing. He turned to question the two alligator hunters.

The cane chairs where they had been sitting were vacant. The alligator

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hunters had cleared out the side door. Redding went to the door and looked out. He didn't see them. He saw something else.

Drifting in across the swamp, its motor throbbing as it headed for a landing in the vacant lot beside the store, was a helicopter. Coming up the bayou channel was a powerful cabin cruiser.

A ten-year old youngster, attracted by the sound of the 'copter's motor, dashed out of a house across the street. He looked at the plane, then at the launch.

"Gulick!" he yelled back to someone still inside the house. "Gulick is coming!"

Running as fast as his skinny legs would carry him, he dived into the horseweeds across the street and disappeared.

The helicopter slid down to a landing in the vacant lot. Almost before the vanes had stopped turning, Redding was at the cabin door. He could see the pilot inside. The door opened.

"Are you Sidney Gulick—" he began, then stopped as he realized his mistake. Wearing a leather helmet, the pilot had looked like a man. As she got out of the plane, he saw she was an uncommonly attractive girl.

"No," the girl answered. She looked curiously at Redding. "I'm Gerry Nash. Mr. Gulick is in the launch. If you will wait he will be here."

She walked across the lot and entered the side door of the store.

The launch pulled up at the little landing behind the store. A heavy-set man clad in gray flannel trousers climbed out of it.

Redding waited.

CHAPTER II

"REDDING? Jim Redding? Hm." Gulick pressed thick lips into a line as thin as the edge of a knife. His gaze went out across the swamp, across the cane and the occasional cypress trees, focused on a buzzard wheeling on lazy wings in the bright blue sky. Something about the carrion bird seemed to fascinate him. He did not look at his questioner. "You are Mark Redding, you say? Jim Redding was your brother, you say?"

"Yes," Redding answered. The way Gulick kept repeating "You say?" angered him. It sounded like Gulick was trying to make him out a liar. "He was with you and Nash on an expedition that Nash financed to explore the swamp. At least that's what he wrote me."

"Nash? Oh, yes, Nash. Nash was interested in investigating certain forms of living creatures found in the swamp. He had the theory that life originally emerged in swamps such as this millions of years ago. He thought the process might be continuing still, that somewhere in the swamps the processes of creation might be working even now, and that careful investigation might reveal new life forms emerging. Ha. Hm. You're scarcely interested in that, however. Jim Redding, you say? Let me think. What was the name of that young fellow—"

His eyes were still on the buzzard. Redding waited patiently. A step sounded behind him. It was the girl pilot of the helicopter. Gulick greeted her effusively.

"Gerry, my dear! You're looking fine, fine indeed." He slipped an arm around her, kissed her with every sign of affection. She accepted the kiss but did not respond.

"Hello, Sid," she said. "Have a nice trip?"

"Very satisfactory trip."

"Ready to go?"

"Yes, my dear. Yes, indeed. Just as

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soon as you get the—ah—eggbeater started, I'm ready." Opening the door of the plane, he stood aside for her to enter.

"You haven't answered my question," Redding spoke.

"Your question?" For a moment Gulick looked blank. "Oh, yes. You must excuse me for neglecting you. I'm a little absent-minded. You're looking for—what was the name now? Jim Redding. Ah, yes. My dear," he spoke to the girl, "do you remember anybody by the name of Jim Redding who was with us in 1941? I can't seem to place the name."

The girl had one foot on the step that led to the cabin of the helicopter. She seemed to freeze in place. The knuckles on the hand that grasped the handhold turned white. Slowly she took her foot from the step, turned to Redding.

Her face was paper white. Her eyes, as blue as the sky overhead, were alive with sudden fear.

When she spoke, her voice was calm.

"Redding? At the moment I don't seem to recall any one by that name. Was he a friend of yours?"

"My brother."

"Oh!" Fear deepened in the eyes.

"I've got it!" Gulick spoke suddenly. He snapped his fingers. "Redding was with us before the war. He left us to enter service. I remember him now. In January, I think it was, of 1942, he left us to go into the Army. Volunteered for the air forces. Fine boy, mighty fine boy. I've often wondered what happened to him. You haven't heard a word from him, you say? Too bad. So many fine young fellows—"

"He went into the Army—" Redding exploded, then caught himself. This was neither the time nor the place to reveal that Jim Redding had volunteered for service on two separate occasions, and had been turned down both times, because of a punctured eardrum and a heart murmur. Whatever had happened to him, he hadn't entered the army. No doctor on earth would ever have passed him for service.

"Sorry I can't help you any more," Gulick said, helping the girl into the 'copter. "Sorry. Please stand back now. The vanes are rather dangerous. What's this? Something for me? Ah, thank you, Jenkins."

THE storekeeper had come running up to the ship. He handed an envelope to Gulick. The latter glanced at it, thrust it into his pocket without opening it.

The ship's motor roared. Vanes spinning madly, the eggbeater dragged itself into the air, moved slowly out across the swamp, then went straight as an arrow toward its unknown destination.

"I thought you said you didn't know Gulick?" Redding said.

"Gulick? Did you ask me about Gulick? I didn't understand you." Jenkins turned, and walked back into his store. He slammed the door behind him.

A wind, tangy with the odor of stagnant water and Spanish moss and decay, moved across the swamp. Somewhere in that deep fastness of water and cane and tangled jungle growth, a bull alligator bellowed softly. The buzzard that Gulick had watched was wheeling in smaller circles now and was nearer the ground. A second buzzard had joined the first one.

Redding, his face tense with baffled anger, stared in the direction in which the helicopter had vanished. Gulick had lied to him. Jenkins had lied to him. Why? The girl pilot had showed sudden fear at his questions. What was she afraid of? For that matter, what was Jenkins and the two alligator hunt-

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ers afraid of?

He tried to remember what his brother had told him about Sidney Gulick. It hadn't been much. Gulick was a biochemist employed by Nash, a sort of a hired hand who did routine laboratory analyses. Nash had been the important member of the expedition Jim Redding had joined. Jim's letters had been full of Nash. Redding had gotten the picture of a benevolent, wealthy old scientist, eccentric but lovable, who poked around in swamps looking for the origin of life. If anybody could give him information about his brother, Nash would be the man. Where could he find Nash? He was so busy wondering where he could find the scientist that he didn't hear the man scream.

He did hear the sound of running feet. He turned, searching for the origin of the sound. Zack, the alligator hunter, was running down the main street of Tom's Landing. Redding had seen men run with machine gun bullets zipping around them, he had seen the Supermen run from Sherman tanks—and that was really some running—but he had never seen a man run any harder than this alligator hunter. Zack's tongue was hanging out, his face was contorted as he fought for breath, he was covering more than ten feet at a single stride, and his feet were tearing up the sandy soil.

"What the devil? Oh, oh—"

Floating through the air behind Zack, keeping pace with him but apparently not able to overtake him, was a globe of shining mist the size of a basketball. It was mist and yet it wasn't mist. It looked like a ball made up of thousands of strands taken from spider webs, each single strand covered with microscopic globules of dew that glittered in the sunlight.

Zack saw Redding. "Willo!" he screamed. "Run, you fool!"

As he screamed the warning, he tripped and fell headlong.

The misty globe dived toward him.

The hunter rolled frantically, saw it hanging in the air over him, screamed again. Redding had the dazed impression that the doors of several houses had opened and as hastily slammed again as the people in them looked out to see what the shouting was about. One look was all they needed to slam and bolt the doors. No one came out to help. The sound of slamming windows rattled the air. Redding raced toward the fallen man.

Zack seemed to be doing a dozen different things at once. He was trying to get to his feet, he was trying to kick at the ball of mist, he was trying to slap at it, at the same time. The ball was following him like a hound snapping at a cornered rabbit.

Redding vehemently wished for the gun in his bag. Lacking the pistol, he slapped at the ball.

A jolt of icy numbness seared all feeling from his arm.

HISSING like a frightened snake, the ball spun upward. It had no eyes but it looked at Redding and Redding knew it was looking at him. When he slapped it, it had seemed to melt away from his hand, to bounce like an extremely spongy rubber ball. Except for the numbing shock to his hand, he was not certain he had touched it.

It hung in the air, regarding him. Redding stared at it. He didn't know what to do next.

Zack scrambled to his feet.

"Run!" he hissed. "Follow me!"

He dived headlong toward the nearest shack. Redding learned later the shack belonged to the hunter. Now it merely seemed the nearest place of refuge. He followed the hunter. The

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shining ball of dancing mist darted after them.

Zack kicked the door open, scrambled inside. Redding was right behind him. The hunter slammed the door. It was a one-room shack with a ragged bed in one corner, a cookstove in the other, a table and several chairs between. There were two windows. Zack slammed them shut. His tortuous breathing was loud in the room. Outside the door was a hissing sound that resembled high pressure steam escaping from a small jet.

"What was that thing?" Redding demanded.

"Willo," the hunter gasped. "We—we were dead monkeys. Or I was."

"What the hell is a willo?"

Zack shook his head. "They come out of the swamp. That's all I know. You see 'em sometimes at night. First time I ever saw one in the daytime. First time I ever saw one here in town. Come here and look." He pointed out the window.

Redding looked out through the dirty glass. The willo was hanging in the air ten feet above the ground. It seemed to be resting. The microscopic points that looked like dew glittered along the strands of spider web that formed its body.

"We're safe here. They can't come through glass or through walls. Watch!"

A lean razorback hog ambled between the two houses. The ball of mist tensed when the pig came into sight. Like a panther, it seemed to be gathering itself to spring. It darted downward.

The hog didn't see it coming and probably would have paid no attention if it had seen the incredible creature in the air above it. The ball of mist settled gently on the animal. The hog stopped dead still. Something had happened to it, it didn't know what. Nose down, ears still, four feet firmly planted on the ground, it stood without moving. Either it did not know what was happening or it was paralyzed. The ball of mist seemed to sink partly into the pig. Slowly the hog's four feet spread out. The leg muscles seemed to relax gradually. The hog toppled over, did not move.

Two, three, four minutes passed. The ball of mist seemed to feed on the pig. Then it floated free. Moving with renewed energy, it darted into the air, passed above the tree tops and was gone.

A dead hog lay in the yard.

The fifteen or twenty inhabitants of the town of Tom's Landing huddled in their houses, knowing that death had walked among them. Redding went slowly out into the yard, examined the hog. There was not a mark on its body. For all he could see, the hog had just laid down and died. If he hadn't seen the tragedy happen, he would have sworn it hadn't, couldn't, happen. But the hog was dead.

"That would have been me, if I hadn't seen it coming," Zack spoke. He looked out across the swamp. His face was gray with fear.

CHAPTER III

LATE afternoon came slowly over the swamp. Somewhere off behind the house a catbird trilled sleepily. The bull alligator was still mumbling morosely to himself off in the fastnesses of water and weeds.

"Nope," Zack said, for the fifth or sixth time. "You saved my worthless carcass and I thank you kindly for it but I ain't takin' you out in that swamp to look for anybody, not for a million dollars. You can stay here in my shack as long as you like, I'll dig up vittles for you and I'll find some corn to go along with 'em, you can have my boat

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or my gun or anything else I've got, but I ain't takin' you out to Gulick's island, or anywheres near it."

The hunter wiped the mouth of the jug, tilted it across his arm, let the liquor flow down his throat. He handed the jug to Redding. There was corn whiskey in the jug. Redding drank slowly.

"Why not?" he asked.

"You helped me drag that hawg off, didn't you?" the hunter answered. "Then you know why not!"

"Is that the only reason?"

"Ain't that enough reason?"

"But there may not be any more of those things and anyhow, we could outrun them. You said yourself it was possible to outrun them, that they couldn't fly very fast."

"Not out there you can't outrun 'em. And if there is only one, that's too many."

"Okay, okay," Redding agreed. "Do you know anything else about my brother?"

"Only what I told you. He was in here two or three times with Gulick and Nash. After the war started, I never saw him again. I ain't seen Nash in a couple of years."

"How do you think Jenkins got his camera?" Redding questioned.

"Mark, I don't know. That camera was in the showcase for a long time. I haven't the foggiest notion where he got it. Jenkins and Gulick have always been pretty thick. Maybe Gulick gave it to him."

The hunter was willing to talk. The fact that Redding had saved his hide had opened his mouth. He just didn't know any more. Jenkins might be able to tell him something but Jenkins wasn't talking. Gulick might know something but he wasn't talking either. That left Nash, if the scientist could be found.

"I guess I'll have to find the way myself," Redding decided.

"You can go if you want to," Zack said, a little sullenly. "But if I was you, I'd go in the other direction. That's what I'm goin' to do as soon as I can get out of here. There's plenty of other places where I can hunt gators besides Tom's Landing. Hey. What's that?"

A far-off drone was audible inside the shack. Redding went to the window and looked out. The helicopter was dropping down for another landing beside Jenkins' store. The girl was at the controls again. She brought the ungainly ship to a perfect landing, stopped the vanes, went into the store. Redding and the hunter watched her.

"I'd like to know where she fits into this picture," Redding said.

Zack shook his head. "I wouldn't know. This swamp is thick with mysteries and she's just another one that I can't figure out."

A few minutes later Redding saw the girl come out of the store. She came down the street, into the yard, knocked on the front door. Zack opened it.

"Jenkins said I could find Mr. Redding here. Could I speak to him?"

"Certainly," Redding answered for himself. "What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Gulick sent me back for you," the girl answered. "He remembered that your brother forgot some personal belongings at the island when he left. Mr. Gulick thought you might like to have them."

Redding took a deep breath while he tried to grasp the meaning of this new turn of events. Gulick had sent his helicopter back for him. Before he could answer, Zack was speaking.

"Don't you do it, Mark," the hunter said. "Don't you go near that island. Whatever your brother left there, leave it where it is. You don't need it bad enough to go after it. Let 'em bring

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it in here, let 'em bring it to you. Don't you go after it."

"Nonsense," Redding answered. He turned to the girl. "I'll be glad to go. Wait until I get my bag."

IGNORING the hunter's frightened warning, he picked up his bag, followed the girl out to the ship. She paused at the cabin door.

"Your friend back there gave you some good advice," she said. "Do you want to take it?"

Redding stared at her in blank astonishment. Slowly he shook his head.

"Okay. Get in," she said. Her voice was bright and hard without the slightest trace of emotion in it. Only after the ship was in the air did he see the tears running down her cheeks.

Mark Redding did not know much about girls. He had been in the army so long he scarcely remembered that women existed. The tears made him realize that this girl had been putting up a front. She had been pretending to be brave and competent, to be strong and fearless, when underneath she was just an extremely frightened little girl.

"Can I do something to help?" he asked gently.

She shot a startled glance at him out of the corner of her eyes. He got the impression that maybe this was the first time in her life anybody had offered to help her.

"You could have stayed back there at Tom's Landing," she answered. "Better still, you could have gone back north. That would have been the sensible thing to do because you can't do anything to help down here. All you can do is get yourself—" She hesitated, changed her mind about what she was going to say.

"Killed?" Redding supplied. "All I can do is get myself killed? Is that what you were about to say?"

"Yes," she bluntly answered.

Redding chuckled. "Thanks for the warning," he said. "Thirty minutes after I arrived in Tom's Landing I realized I had come to a fine place to get myself killed. *Is that what happened to my brother?*"

Like bullets out of a gun, he shot the words at her. In his mind was the grim suspicion that this girl knew more than she was telling. He hoped to startle information out of her.

It worked.

"Yes," she said. "No, no, no!" she gasped, a split second later. "I didn't mean that. I don't know—"

"I heard you the first time," Redding answered. He leaned back in his seat, stared from unseeing eyes at the swampy jungle below the slowly moving ship. So he had it. Jim was dead. The news did not exactly surprise him. He had suspected as much all along. But the confirmation of what had been only suspicions tightened a cold knot around his heart. His brother was dead.

"How did he die?"

"I—"

"Was he murdered?"

"That—"

"Who did it?"

"But—"

"Did Gulick do it?"

"I never—"

"Did Nash kill him?"

"Nash!" Surprise showed through the misery on her face. "Mr. Redding! Don't you know my name?"

"No, I don't."

"I'm Geraldine Nash. Roger Nash is my father. He didn't kill your brother. Don't you say he did. Don't you dare say it. Don't you even think it."

"UH!" Redding gulped. So this girl was the daughter of Roger Nash! "I'm sorry," he fumbled for words. "Please forgive me, Miss Nash. I

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didn't have any idea that Nash was your father. All I knew was that you were here and that you obviously knew something you wouldn't tell. I'm sorry for the third degree technique but I had to know."

"It's all right," she dabbed at her cheeks with a tiny handkerchief. "Now that you know you—can't help any—do you want me to turn around and take you back to Tom's Landing?"

"What?"

"I'll take you back. No one will ever know the difference. I'll say you had already gone."

"Thanks."

Her face lightened. "You mean I can take you back?"

"Yes," Redding answered. "You can take me back, when I know how my brother died. Do you want to tell me?"

"I—I can't—"

"You mean you won't?" he challenged.

"No, it isn't that," she flared. "I can't. There are good reasons why I can't talk to you or to anyone else. I've already told you too much."

"Oh. Perhaps the sheriff or the state police or whoever the local authorities are in this area would be able to find out for me."

"That's why you're here now," the girl answered. "To keep you from going to the authorities. The note Jenkins gave Gulick said you had bought your brother's camera and knew too much. If you hadn't bought that camera, you wouldn't have been able to prove anything and you wouldn't have been bothered. Don't you realize, Mr. Redding, that I'm taking you back to the island to keep you from taking that camera and your story to the authorities? *Now* do you want to go on or do you want me to turn back with you?"

In a dozen ways, she had tried to warn him. Redding knew she was trying to help him, she was trying to save his neck. He shrewdly suspected she was risking her own life in trying to help him. He remembered the note Jenkins had given Gulick. The latter had thrust it into his pocket without reading it. Later, when he read it, he had sent this girl back for Redding. When Jenkins had sold him the camera he hadn't known who the purchaser was. The storekeeper must have realized too late that Redding had recognized the camera. He had promptly given this information to Gulick. And Gulick had acted.

A hundred warning impulses told Redding he ought to do what Miss Nash suggested, he ought to turn back. Out there in the swamp was danger. Up ahead of them on the mysterious island that was their destination was danger. If he went ahead, his life was probably not worth a plugged dime.

He shrugged. If he turned back, he would never know. And he had lived so long with danger all around him that his senses were dulled.

"I'm going with you," he said.

She seemed to sag a little at the words but she did not reply.

"I want you to know that I appreciate what you've tried to do," he continued. "I'll be on guard."

She shook her head.

"One other thing," he added. "I think you're in trouble, serious trouble. I would like to help you, if you will let me and if I can."

A tiny smile danced on her face. "Thank you," she said. "Will you take this?"

She reached down into a compartment on the left side of the pilot's seat, pulled out a box about the size and shape of a cigarette case. It was made of aluminum.

"Put this in your pocket and keep it there. Don't let anybody see it and

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don't ever move out of your room without it. Put it in your pajama pocket when you go to sleep at night."

"Thanks," he said. "What is it?"

"It's a present. That's all I can tell you. And if anybody discovers you have it and asks where you got it, tell them you found it. But don't ever tell anyone that I gave it to you."

HE ACCEPTED the strange cigarette case, dubiously slipped it into his pocket. Ahead of them, out of the growing dusk, an island was emerging. A few twinkling lights glistened among the trees.

"That long low building where you see the lights is our living quarters," Gerry Nash said. "The big dark building off to the right is the laboratory. This is the island."

"Um. Quite a big place," Redding said. He was staring at the island but out of the corner of his eye he was watching something that had appeared from nowhere and was struggling desperately to keep up with the moving helicopter.

It was one of the glowing basketballs that had attacked the alligator hunter back in the town of Tom's Landing. In the dusk it looked like a dim will-o'-the-wisp that are occasionally seen floating over swampy country. Redding had never seen a will-o'-the-wisp but he had read about them.

Redding watched it, said nothing. He reached down into the bag at his side, stealthily extracted the gun and an extra clip of cartridges from it, slipped them into his pocket.

The floating ball gave up trying to keep up with the helicopter, veered off, and then suddenly vanished into the darkness.

Under Gerry Nash's skillful handling, the eggbeater dropped to a landing without a jar.

CHAPTER IV

GULICK was waiting in the shadows for the helicopter to land. The vanes had barely stopped turning before he was opening the cabin door. He glanced at Redding, nodded, then spoke to the girl.

"Gerry, my dear. Come here. I want to talk to you."

Helping her from the plane, he took her arm and led her off into the darkness. Redding unashamedly followed. For once in his life, he was grateful for his army training. It had given him the ability to move with the stealth of an Indian. Many times in the past few years his life had depended on his ability to move without sound. His hunch was that this was another one of those times. When he stopped moving, he was lying under a tree in a clump of grass beside the path Gulick had taken. He could have reached out and touched the girl with his hand.

"Where are we going, Sid?" he heard Gerry Nash ask.

"To Cuba," Gulick answered. "Sometime tonight. I want the plane ready to leave at a moment's notice. From Cuba we're going into South America. Your father is in the laboratory packing the equipment he wants to take with him."

"South America!" Surprise was in the girl's voice. "We can't do that, Sid. We'll need passports."

"I have them. I arranged everything while I was away. And I have something else, Gerry!" Exultation showed in his voice. "A letter of credit for almost two million dollars. I succeeded in disposing of all the gold the submarine brought, got it transferred into dollars. When we clear out of here, my dear, we'll be taking a fortune with us. Think of that! We'll be rich!"

Redding whistled silently. Two mil-

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lion dollars brought here by submarine! Two million in gold! It was a fortune worth fighting for. But where had the gold come from? Why had it been brought here? Redding's mind raced madly, seeking an answer to the mysteries hidden here in the swamp. A secret laboratory, a fortune in gold, a submarine, an unwilling but strangely cowed girl, floating balls of mysterious death. What was going on here?

"But Schultz!" the girl protested. "And Wasser. What about them? They claim this gold belongs to—"

"I don't care what they claim," Gulick snapped. "They brought the gold here to pay us, didn't they? That makes it ours, doesn't it? They have no right to the gold. It's m—— ours! And I intend to keep it."

"They won't like it," Gerry Nash slowly said.

"What do I care what they like?" Gulick answered. "They're not going with us."

Silence. Redding could almost hear Gerry Nash thinking.

"Sid. Does that mean—" she whispered.

"Never mind what it means!" Gulick answered. "You go get the helicopter ready."

"But—"

"Do as I say!" the biochemist snarled, his voice harsh in the darkness. "I'll take the responsibility. You just do as you're told!"

FOR an instant, Redding thought she was going to slap the man. Silently he prayed for her to tell Gulick to go to hell. If she would only smack him, tell him off—Redding silently thumbed the safety on his gun. If she would defy Gulick, he would come out of hiding and help her.

"All right, Sid," Gerry Nash answered in a voice with tears in it. But she didn't defy Gulick. Instead, she turned and walked back toward the helicopter. Gulick went in the other direction, disappearing toward the dark building that served as a laboratory.

Redding swore silently but did not move. A dark shadow lifted itself from the ground not ten feet from him, slipped furtively away toward the living quarters.

"Holy hell!" Redding thought. "Somebody else was listening in too!"

Somebody—he couldn't guess who—had also overheard Gulick and the girl.

Redding slipped back toward the plane, then walked boldly up to it. Gerry Nash was sitting in the cabin crying.

"Oh, hello," she said. "Take your bag up to the living quarters. Sam, the Negro cook, or Frances, his wife, will show you your room. Dinner will be ready soon."

Redding lifted his bag out of the ship. "Okay," he said. He glanced back at her. "You coming too?"

"I'll be along soon," she answered.

Redding pounded on the door of the long, low building that served as living quarters for whomsoever lived on this mysterious swamp island, was admitted by a ponderous colored woman, followed her heavy footsteps through what was apparently a living room into a long narrow hall.

"This be your room," she said, stopping at a door at the end of the hall. "We's fixin' to eat right away. You come out soon as you's ready."

She waddled off, apparently in the direction of the kitchen, leaving Redding to his own devices. The room contained a cot, a washstand, a chair, and a closet. It was hot and stuffy in the place. Redding went to the single window to open it. The window was nailed shut and a complete pane of glass was missing. There was no screen.

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"Mosquitoes will eat me alive in here," he thought. "That is, if I stay alive long enough for the mosquitoes to get a crack at me!"

He did not doubt that he was in deadly danger. Danger brooded over this lonely swamp island like fog over the jungle. Somewhere in this place a trap was set for him. He knew too much. Because he knew too much, he was to be swept aside as one smashes a stinging mosquito. Oddly, he did not know what it was he knew that made him dangerous. Of course, he knew enough to demand an investigation. Gulick certainly did not want the state police to do any poking around on this island. And yet—what was Gulick doing here that he did not want investigated? What was the secret of this swamp island that the biochemist was so carefully hiding? What was the source of his power over Gerry Nash? Where did the two million-dollars in gold fit into the picture? Where—what—he shook his head. Questions. No answers.

Nor did he get any of the answers at dinner. But he did meet Schultz and Wasser.

Gulick greeted him when he entered the dining room. "Ah, Redding. Those things that belong to your brother, I know they're here but I haven't had a chance to find them. I'll look them up tomorrow for you. In the meantime, I should like to have you consider yourself my guest."

So I am to stay tonight, Redding thought. *And tomorrow you will be gone.*

"Thank you," he said aloud. "Be glad to stay."

DINNER was a silent affair. Gulick sat at the head of the table, Gerry Nash at the end. Schultz and Wasser sat directly across from Redding. Of the mysterious scientist, Nash, there was no sign. They were served by Frances, the ponderous colored woman who had shown Redding to his room.

It was one of the strangest meals Redding had ever eaten. No one said a word.

"I saw a strange sight this afternoon," Redding ventured at last.

"Um. What was that?" Gulick asked.

Redding described the incredible ball of floating mist that had attacked the alligator hunter in Tom's Landing. He was curious to see how Gulick and the others would react to the story.

The reaction was even deeper silence than had existed before. Even the occasional scrape of silver on china faded away as if each person in the room was suddenly trying to eat as quietly as possible. Gerry Nash looked fixedly at her plate. Schultz and Wasser seemed not to have heard what he had said. Gulick frowned.

"What do you think that thing was?" Redding persisted.

"Um," Gulick answered. "Had you been drinking?"

"No, I hadn't been drinking," Redding answered. "I saw the thing. I helped drag the dead hog away."

"I have no idea what it was," Gulick answered. The tone of his voice indicated the subject was closed. Before he had finished speaking, Gerry Nash had abruptly risen and left the room. Gulick stared at her but said nothing. Two minutes later Schultz and Wasser rose and excused themselves. Gulick hastily gulped the rest of his food.

"Excuse me, Redding. Got some work that simply has to done. Make yourself right at home. You'll find some excellent books in the library. Read if you would like until you are ready to turn in."

Redding was left alone at the table.

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"Would you be wishin' anything more?" the colored maid asked, entering the dining room.

"No, thanks," Redding answered. He rose from the table, lit a cigarette, went out on the porch. Around him the swamp was still. There was no sign of Schultz, Wasser, or Gulick. They had left the building and the night had swallowed them.

"I wonder where that booby trap is," Redding thought. "I wonder where it is."

He found it in his room sometime around midnight. In spite of his intention to remain awake, he had dozed. He awakened with the sound of high pressure steam in his ears, high pressure steam escaping from a tiny jet. Grim experience had taught him how to be wide awake instantly. No amount of experience would ever teach him how to control the flow of cold sweat that poured over him when he heard that high pressure hiss.

He opened his eyes a slit. And saw it. A dimly luminous ball of pale light was floating through the window. The missing pane of glass! That had been the booby trap! The glass had been deliberately removed from the window so this thing could enter!

Redding moved so fast his body was a blur of motion. In less than split seconds he was off the cot, across the room, and had the doorknob in his hand. Zack had said these things couldn't pass through walls. With the door behind him, he would be safe.

The knob wouldn't turn as he twisted it. He shook it savagely, realized then that the door was locked.

Somebody was making damned certain he wouldn't escape!

FEELING like a rat in a trap, he dropped flat on the floor. As he fell he was reaching for the gun in his pocket. He had lain down with all his clothes on. The gun was in his pocket. He yanked it free, thumbed the safety off, knowing that even if bullets would stop the creature that had come out of the night, it was already too late to use them. Deep in his mind his sense of time was telling him he ought to be paralyzed, he ought to be dead, by now. He might have beaten the floating basketball to the door, but when he couldn't open the door, it should have struck him instantly.

It hadn't struck him. It wasn't even trying to strike him. He gasped in astonishment when he saw what it was doing.

It was trying to escape from him! It was inside the room but instead of attacking him, it was dashing madly from corner to corner seeking a way out. The hiss of its motion was shrill with—fear!

It was afraid of him. It was trying to get away. It darted back and forth, apparently so crazed with fear that it had forgotten the window where it had entered. Redding didn't move. In his mind was the thought that his life had been saved by a miracle. As he watched, the ball remembered the window, darted down to it, hissed out into the night. He caught a glimpse of it burning the wind as it lifted over the trees.

He crept silently to the window, peered out.

"Mr. Redding," a faltering voice whispered. "Are—are you all right?"

The whisper came from under his window. Out there in the darkness, Gerry Nash was speaking to him.

CHAPTER V

"WHAT makes you think I wouldn't be all right?" Redding said. There was savagery in his voice and he made no attempt to conceal or control

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it. He was still badly scared. Somebody had tried to kill him. He was not at all certain that Miss Gerry Nash did not have something to do with the creature that had been in his room. In his present shaken mental condition, he was not certain of anything. "Why wouldn't I be all right?" he repeated.

"I'm so glad!" she answered. "I got here as quickly as I could but I saw it leave just as I arrived. I didn't know until I saw it leave—"

"You didn't know what?" Redding interrupted. He was standing at the edge of the window taking care not to expose himself. The gun covered the spot where her voice was coming from.

"I didn't—didn't know what was going to happen to you."

"But when you saw that floating death ball leave, you knew all right?"

"Y—es. That is—"

"Then you know what that thing is!"

"Y—es."

Redding laughed, a sound without mirth in it. "I suppose you're going to tell me next that you came here to save me from it!"

"Y—es," she faltered. The scorn in his voice was stinging her. "That is—you weren't in any danger."

"No? I saw what one of those things did to a hog. You tell me they're not dangerous."

"They're dangerous all right," she admitted. "They're a hundred times as deadly as a rattlesnake. But *you* weren't in any danger, not from it."

She watched as the grim struggle went on for possession of the automatic weapon

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"No?" Her sureness shook him. He was being unfair and he knew it, but he was still so badly scared he couldn't completely control his reactions.

"It didn't attack you, did it?"

"N—o."

"After it got into the room, it tried to get away, didn't it?"

"How did you know?" he faltered. "Were you watching?"

"No. I saved you from the gas balls this afternoon."

"What?"

"The little aluminum box that looks like a cigarette case," the girl explained. "No gas ball will even come near you as long as you're carrying that."

"Huh?" Redding grunted. Until this moment he had completely forgotten the little aluminum box. He felt hastily in his pocket. It was still there. "You mean this box saved me from that thing? How the devil could it?"

"That box contains an ultra high-frequency miniature radio transmitter. I have one of them, Sid—all of us have them. We couldn't work with the gas balls without them. Occasionally the gas balls escape. One of them would kill all of us if we didn't carry the little radio transmitters to drive them away."*

"Holy hell!" Redding breathed. They *worked* with the luminous balls! The monstrosities belonged here on this island! The implications back of her words made his mind reel. She was speaking again.

"Listen, Mr. Redding, I haven't time to explain everything. I came to get you. We've got to get away from this island and we've got to do it right away!"

"You came to get me!" Somewhere inside of him he was aware of a warm feeling. She had come to help him. That was good. In giving him the little radio transmitter in the aluminum box, she had already saved his neck once. The good feeling grew. There were questions that went with it, lots of questions, but they could wait until later. For the moment at least, he was convinced of the honesty of Gerry Nash's intentions. Whatever part she was playing in this amazing adventure, he felt, in this moment at least, that she was on his side.

"Wait a minute," he answered.

THE lower window frame had four panes of glass in it. One was missing. The door was locked. The window was nailed down. He snatched the blanket from the cot, stuffed part of it out through the opening where the pane was missing, grasped the frame in the middle, pulled vigorously. The breaking panes of glass, muffled by the blanket, made very little noise as they fell inward. He stepped through the shattered window, dropped lightly to the ground.

"Okay," he said. "Where do we go now? You know this place. You'll have to lead the way."

"We'll take the 'copter," Gerry Nash's suddenly soft voice answered. "Sid may hear it start but we'll be gone before he can stop us."

She turned, tugged at his hand for him to follow her.

"One question," Redding's voice stopped her. "This evening, no matter how much you seemed to dislike it, you

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* *Radio Death Rays:—The radiations from the miniature radio transmitters were in effect death rays to the gas balls. The life energy of the gas balls was a radio frequency vibration high in the ultra frequency ranges. The radiations from the tiny transmitters disrupted the functioning of this vital life process of the gas balls and drove them away from the transmitters.—ED.*

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obeyed Sidney Gulick's orders. Tonight you're running away from him."

"Early this evening my father was alive," she answered. "Now he's dead."

Pain and hurt and fatigue were in her voice, all the pain in the world. She was suddenly a little girl, a very frightened little girl, crying in the darkness.

"I'm sorry," Redding said gently. "I did not know."

"For over three years Gulick has held my father prisoner on this island. I obeyed him, because I knew what would happen to my father if I didn't obey. Now my father is dead and I no longer have to obey."

"Oh," Redding said. Sympathy and understanding welled up in him, found expression in the single syllable that he spoke. At last he understood why this girl had obeyed Sidney Gulick. The biochemist had been holding her father a prisoner. She either did what he told her to do, or else! Redding had been inside Germany long enough to know how easy it was to hold someone prisoner and from that fact to command the unquestioning obedience of the prisoner's relatives.

"I'm sorry," Redding whispered. "I'm very sorry. I did not know. Did Gulick—your father—"

"My father died the same way your brother died—because somebody tampered with the radio transmitter that protected him from the gas balls."

"Somebody!"

"I don't know who. I only suspect. Your brother objected to the use Gulick proposed to make of the gas balls my father discovered. After he objected, he died. Of course it could have been an accident, but—"

"He died," Redding said. "That's the important thing: he died." The old savagery had crept back into his voice.

"I'll tell you the whole story later," Gerry Nash whispered. "But we've got to get out of here, and we've got to do it right away, or we may never get out."

Desperate urgency was in her voice. She tugged at his hand. Redding followed her.

Sitting in the little clearing that served as a landing field, the helicopter was a shadow that looked like a Rube Goldberg invention. A gas ball darted over them as they approached it, veered down, then fled away as the radiations from the miniature radio transmitters repelled it.

"Some time I want you to tell me all about those things," Redding said, involuntarily ducking.

"Later," Gerry Nash answered hastily. She opened the door of the ship, slid into the pilot's seat. Redding slipped into the seat beside her.

The starter ground. And ground. And ground.

The motor refused to start.

"Something's wrong," the girl whispered. "I'll look."

Jerking a flashlight from its holder beside the seat, she lifted the cover off the motor. The flashlight beam poked into the mechanism.

"The distributor arm is gone," Gerry Nash said.

"Gone?" Redding echoed.

"Somebody removed it. Somebody who didn't want this ship to take off."

Rising above the fatal words, Redding heard the sound of running feet coming up the path from the laboratory.

He swung himself out of the cabin, dropped to the ground beside the plane, rolled in the other direction.

A flashlight beam stabbed through the darkness, clearly revealed Gerry Nash as she stood up beside the motor.

CHAPTER VI

"WHAT'S going on here?" Sidney Gulick demanded. His flashlight

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covered Gerry Nash. Redding, lying flat on the ground, could see the gun glinting behind it. Gulick was interested in the girl. Redding began to crawl.

"Sid!" Gerry gasped. "Where did you come from?"

"I heard someone trying to start the helicopter—"

"I'll take the gun," Redding said.

With the muzzle of his own pistol he jabbed Gulick so hard in the back that the bones creaked. Reaching around him, he jerked the pistol from the biochemist's grasp, stepped back, a gun in each hand.

"If you move before I tell you to, I guarantee your guts will be so full of holes in thirty seconds that they will leak forever. Just stand still, Sid. That's all you have to do."

Over his shoulder Redding called. "Gerry. Come and get his light."

Gulick appeared dazed as she took the flashlight from his shaking fingers.

"Surprised to see me?" Redding said. "You thought I was dead, didn't you? Ain't it too damned bad I'm not!"

"Where — where did you come from?" Gulick stuttered.

"That's the sixty-four dollar question, Sid. Where did I come from? And here's the $128.00 question, Sid: Where is that distributor arm?"

"Wh—what?"

"Don't stall. I'd like nothing better than to save the State the expense of hanging you. Produce that distributor arm. Miss Nash and I are clearing out of here. Of course, now that you've come along, we'll take you with us— but not to Cuba, Sid, not to Cuba tonight. Something tells me that if you ever get to Cuba it will be in the spirit world. Where is that distributor arm?"

"I— I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't! You fixed the ship so nobody would leave here without you. A little insurance to protect you if anything went wrong, eh, Sid? Where is that arm? I'll give—"

Sock!

Something hit Redding from behind, descending with crushing force.

Men who live through battles often find they have developed a sense of danger, a feeling that they had better duck at the right time. Redding had lived through many battles but he didn't need his keenly developed sense of danger here. The sound of a stealthy step behind him told him the blow was coming. He rolled with it. The club knocked him head over heels, splintered his vision with thousands of shooting stars, dazed him, but did not knock him out. He rolled like a tenpin hit by a bowling ball and he did not get to his feet, but when he stopped rolling and sat up, he was shooting.

The shadow that had hit him ducked. Gerry Nash screamed and threw the flashlight at it. It ducked again. Redding took a second snap shot at it. The shadow hit the ground.

Gulick ran like a fool. The second after the first shot split the night, he was gone—toward the laboratory.

Redding shot at the ground where the shadow had fallen. He had seen too many men hug the ground when bullets were coming at them, hit the dirt when they weren't hit, to believe that his dazed aim, shaky from the blow on the head, he had scored a hit. He shot again.

Over in the dark shadow of the trees at the edge of the little landing field, a machine pistol let go. The air around Redding sounded like it was being torn as the slugs ripped through it.

REDDING threw himself flat on the ground. He got a mouthful of

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dirt as a bullet hit the sandy soil inches in front of his face. He fired at the flash of the machine pistol.

The pistol abruptly was silent. He couldn't tell whether or not he had hit the man who held it. All he knew was that it was silent.

"Gerry!" he whispered.

"Yes," she answered from somewhere in front of him.

"Crawl back along the path," he ordered. "I'll cover for you."

He heard the rustle of her body as she slid along the ground. Redding waited. Far off in the swamps a bull alligator was bellowing. The night wind sighed through the scrub pines beside the clearing. The helicopter was still a Rube Goldberg invention in the night.

Redding slipped a fresh clip of cartridges into his pistol. Somewhere in the clearing he could hear a man crawling stealthily. The man was going farther away. Redding began to edge along the ground following the girl. He did not dare risk giving that machine pistol another chance at him. He had seen one of those pistols cut a man in two with the murderous stream of bullets it threw.

"Gerry," he whispered.

"Yes," she answered.

"You all right."

"I'm alive. But my nervous system will never recover."

"Who the devil was it that hit me with the club? And who was using that machine pistol?"

"Schultz," she answered. "I caught a glimpse of him as he hit you. That was Wasser with the pistol."

"Holy hell!" he muttered. "They were trying to help Gulick."

"I don't think so," Gerry Nash said. "I think they know that Gulick intended to leave them here, with you, and my dad. I think they're the ones who removed the distributor arm, so nobody could use the helicopter without them."

"I still don't get it," he frowned. "Who are they? Scientists who were helping your father?"

"Hardly," she answered. "I don't question their technical ability but they weren't helping dad. They're a couple of agents sent over by the Nazis to buy the gas balls from Gulick. Using someone in South America, he got in touch with the Germans, told them what he had, offered to sell. Schultz and Wasser came over by submarine to investigate. They saw the gas balls would be an extremely powerful weapon—thousands of those things sprung in a surprise attack would demoralize an opposing army—but the war ended before they could return to Germany with their information. Schultz and Wasser are still here."

"Hell on earth!" Redding whistled. "A couple of Nazis. And I thought I had heard and seen everything! That's where the gold came from that Gulick has."

"Yes. They paid off in gold but he has had a lot of trouble getting it changed into more negotiable currency. The government asks questions if you try to turn gold in at a bank these days. Gulick would have been gone long ago if he could have managed to convert the gold into money he could use. But—" she seemed mildly perplexed. "—How did you know about the gold?"

"I eavesdropped," he answered. He told her how he had listened to her conversation with Gulick when she first brought him to the island. "And there was someone else listening too," he added, suddenly remembering something that had risen from the ground.

"Probably Schultz or Wasser," Gerry Nash said. "That's how they knew Gulick was planning to leave tonight."

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"Hm. Can either of them fly that helicopter?"

"No. They're tricky things to handle. I'm the only pilot here."

"Then it stacks up like this," Redding said slowly. "They've got the distributor arm, but they can't fly the ship. We've got the pilot, but we haven't got the missing distributor arm, so we can't fly. It's a stalemate. Gulick can't take a hand in the game because he has neither the pilot nor the missing part. We're all marooned here and we're all just begging for the chance to cut each other's throat. What a fine setting for murder!"

The night wind went whispering through the scrub pines.

"What about a boat?" Redding asked. "If there is a boat around, we could use it to get away."

"There's a launch," Gerry Nash answered. Hope suddenly sounded in her voice. "We might—if we don't get lost in these blasted swamps—"

"Lead me to the launch," he said. "I'll take a chance on getting lost."

"The launch is tied up at the little dock on the other side of the laboratory," Gerry said. "Come on."

THE laboratory was a dark shadow huddled close to the ground. They moved silently toward it. As they drew near, a luminous ball of light suddenly appeared over the building.

Redding dived for the ground, then sheepishly got to his feet.

"Sorry. My reflexes are working a little too good tonight. When I see danger I hit the dirt first and think afterwards. I keep forgetting those things can't harm us. Hello! There's another one. I won't duck this time."

A second gas ball had leaped up over the building. It gyrated, dancing like some monstrous hound exulting because it has been freed from the leash.

Behind it came a third one. Then a fourth! A fifth. The air was full of the things. Redding stared at them. He could smell danger. "What the hell—"

"Sid has turned them loose," Gerry Nash swiftly said. "They're bred there in the laboratory. There's hundreds of them in there and he's turned them all loose. I wonder why?"

Uneasiness had crept into her voice. "They can't hurt us. They can't touch us. They won't come near us—" Suddenly her voice was frantic.

"Check your radio generator. Is it working all right. Here! Let me have it."

She jerked the cover from the little aluminum box, held it to her ear. "It's dead. The batteries are worn out. Mark! Mark! We've got to get under cover. Those things—"

"How about your generator?" he demanded.

She fumbled inside her dress for it, pulled it out, jerked the cover off.

Her voice was hollow with fear.

"It's dead too. Mark, this isn't an accident. Gulick did this. He changed batteries on every miniature transmitter on the island. He planned to turn the gas balls loose and kill us all. He was going to kill all of us tonight, including me!"

"Back inside the living quarters!" Redding snarled. "Back while we have the chance."

CHAPTER VII

BEFORE they reached the clearing that served as a landing field for the helicopter, a gas ball came up the path behind them. They ducked into the brush. It did not see them. Redding watched it float on up the path. At the clearing it zoomed high in the air, hung poised there like a hawk watching a rabbit on the ground below, then,

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again like a hawk, it dived straight down, a flaming streak splitting the darkness.

The night was suddenly hideous with the sound of a man screaming.

"It got someone," Redding whispered.

"Schultz or Wasser," Gerry answered. "Their radio transmitters aren't working either, but they didn't know it—until now!"

The screams stopped as suddenly as they had begun.

"We—we should have warned them," Gerry whispered.

"I should warn a Nazi he's going to die!" Redding grunted. "I spent too long killing them, trying to keep them from killing me, to care if the gas balls get every damned Nazi on earth. Come on! We've got to get under cover."

Over the laboratory the darkness was bright with the floating gas balls. They had gone into a sort of a dance. The darting, spinning, whirling luminous balls would have been beautiful if they had not been so monstrous.

"Can he get those things back in the cage after he's turned them loose?" Redding asked, as they slipped silently toward the house.

"Sometimes they come back. More often they don't. Once they're turned loose, they do what they please."

"Well, all I can say is, with those things loose, times are going to be mighty tough in this swamp. There will be dead hunters, dead trappers, dead fishermen, from here to Miami. When those things start running up in the resorts, there will be the damnedest stampede north this country ever saw!"

"They won't live long," Gerry Nash answered. "The first hard thunderstorm will kill them. That's something Gulick never told the Nazis, you can bet, when they came here to see what he had. He took their money all right but he didn't tell Schultz and Wasser that the violent electromagnetic disturbances—static, you call it in your radio—resulting from lightning tears the gas balls to pieces. Lightning affects them the same way the little radio transmitters do. Radiations from the little transmitters merely drive them away. Lightning, being much stronger, kills them. The first hard thunderstorm that comes along will clear them out of the swamp."

"Then all we have to do is pray for rain," Redding said, looking up. Overhead a million stars sparkled in the black vault of heaven. There was not a cloud in sight.

"Here's the house. We'll go in through the kitchen and wake up Sam and Frances and warn them."

In the kitchen they discovered they would never warn the Negro cook and his fat wife. Both were stretched cold and lifeless on the floor. A swift examination disclosed what had happened. The protective miniature radio transmitters each carried were dead.

"If I needed anything to prove Gulick planned to kill us all, this does it," Gerry Nash said slowly. "The batteries in these little sets will last thirty-six hours. There were two sets of transmitters for everyone. We got a fresh transmitter every evening at 6 o'clock. Daddy changed the batteries every afternoon and brought the sets up here for us to pick up. Every morning he took the old sets back to the laboratory. All Gulick had to do was to put worn-out batteries in the sets, then turn the gas balls loose. We would never know we didn't have any protection—until we were dead."

REDDING carefully closed the kitchen door. "Well, we're here. The gas balls can't get in. Gulick is

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down at the laboratory. I'll bet the batteries in *his* protective transmitter are all right. Somewhere outside there is one dead Nazi and one live Nazi who probably has a machine pistol. We can't go outside. Gulick can't come inside, not while I have a gun. The gas balls can't come in either. Is there food and water in here?"

"Plenty of both," Gerry said.

"Then all we have to do is stay inside until the next thunderstorm kills off the gas balls. After they're gone, I can go outside and give Sidney Gulick a lesson in stalking. Oh, no. Too bad you can't come in but the windows and doors are closed."

He was speaking to the gas ball that had come up to the window. It hung in the darkness outside the panes of glass like a cat at a rat hole.

"Sure, I'll admit I'm a rat," Redding murmured. "But even rats like to stay alive."

Spang! Off in the night a rifle barked. Before he heard the sound of the gun, Redding heard something more horrible—the tinkle of broken glass.

The bullet hit the opposite wall. Redding ignored it. In front of his eyes, a window pane had exploded. The gas ball was already moving toward the opening left by the broken glass.

Redding grabbed Gerry Nash, jerked her through the door that led into the butler's pantry. From the pantry a second door opened into the dining room. They stood in the hot stuffy darkness, scarcely daring to breathe. Through the closed kitchen door they could hear the hiss of high pressure steam escaping. The gas ball had entered the kitchen.

Off in the darkness the rifle barked again. Again the explosion was followed by the rattle of breaking glass.

"It's Gulick," Redding breathed. "He knows we're in here. He's shooting out the windows, so the gas balls can come in and get us."

Gerry Nash's frightened breathing was the only sound.

Again the rifle spoke.

"Why I didn't kill him when I had the chance, I'll never know," Redding whispered. "He stays out there and shoots the windows out, and we stay in here and wait. Sooner or later he's bound to knock the window out of this pantry—"

He didn't want to think what would happen after that.

"Will a bullet stop those gas balls?" he questioned.

He felt rather than saw the shake of her head.

"Will anything stop them?" he continued.

"Nothing on earth except radio frequency radiations."

Redding sighed. He could feel sweat running down his face, he could feel it running down his chest.

He opened the door to the kitchen a crack, peeped through, hastily slammed it shut.

"It's still out there," he said.

"I know," Gerry answered. "I can hear it."

"Gerry, what are those things? Where did they come from? Maybe, if you tell me all about them, I can think of something."

"They are, or their remote ancestors were, will-o'-the-wisps," Gerry Nash said. "My father—I guess you don't know about him—was a scientist, one of the greatest of them all. He was a biologist who spent his life investigating life forms. It was his hope, his dream, that new life forms were still evolving here on earth. Somewhere in some swamp he thought he could find a place where life was coming into existence, where inert atoms were building up into live molecules, the molecules in turn

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building up into complex living substance. That's all life is—a subtle electro-chemical reaction. I'm talking of the mechanics of living matter now, not the spirit. He didn't find what he was seeking but he did discover the will-o'-the-wisps."

THE rifle barked again, talking of exploding violence in the darkness. The tinkle of falling glass answered the report of the gun.

"Go on," Redding urged. As long as she talked, she wouldn't be thinking.

"Will-o'-the-wisps have been seen around swamps for centuries. Superstitious people thought they were ghosts. Another explanation was that they were balls of marsh gas. My father found a few of them here and began to study them. He discovered the things were alive."

"The devil!" Redding said.

"They're really not gas at all," Gerry Nash continued. "They're charged electric fields and they're true parasites in that they draw the source of their energy from living creatures. They kill by sucking every tiny bit of electrical energy out of living bodies. My father spent years studying them. By careful breeding he managed to develop a new strain, much more agile and more deadly than the original will-o'-the-wisps. He wasn't trying to create a deadly killer; he was just trying to find out how the things worked. They can move against gravity: he wanted to know how they did that. They are intelligent in some weird way: he wanted to know how their intelligence worked. It was his dream that by studying the will-o'-the-wisps he could make a great and lasting contribution to human progress."

She sounded very sad. Something of her father's dream was in her. Outside in the night every crack of Gulick's rifle was bringing closer the time when her father's life work would destroy her. Roger Nash had never dreamed of that!

"I'm sorry," Redding said softly. "I see now why Jim thought your father was a wonderful man. I wish I could have known him."

"You would have loved him."

The rifle cracked again. Gulick had moved around to the other side of the house and was breaking the windows there. He didn't know in what room they were hiding. He only knew they were somewhere inside the building. If he broke all the windows, he couldn't miss.

"I've been thinking," Redding said. "There's a table here. Why can't I use it to board up the window. Then when he breaks it, our little friends won't come boiling through. Will that help us any, do you think?"

"Mark! Why didn't I think of that instead of sitting here like a ninny! Of course it will help. They can't go through any solid substance."

Working frantically, he tore the top from the table, fitted it against the window. Boards from the cupboard plugged up the openings at the sides and the top.

They settled down in the darkness to wait. Even if the gas balls couldn't get into the room, Redding knew their fate was only a question of time.

Crack! The window in the pantry tinkled as a bullet hit it. Gulick had moved back to their side of the house. They could hear the soft hiss of the gas balls outside, could catch vague glimpses of them in the cracks around the window, but the hideous monstrosities could not get into the room.

Redding sighed. He began to hope they would see the sun rise again.

The rifle was silent. Now and then they could hear Gulick moving around outside. They kept as quiet as mice.

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Then Redding smelled smoke.

"I've been thinking," Gerry Nash said. "Sam always kept a flashlight here in the pantry."

Redding wasn't listening. He sniffed again. There was no mistaking the odor. Now he could hear the faint crackle of flames

"Gerry," he whispered. "Gulick has set the building on fire. We're not only rats in a trap but the trap is going to turn into a furnace."

VIII

THE odor of smoke was strong in the room now.

"I'm going out there," Redding said. "I can outrun those gas balls, or dodge them, long enough to get Gulick—"

"Wait a minute," the girl protested.

"We don't have many minutes left," he answered.

"Let me see! Dad used tiny little cells no bigger than a lead pencil. He used two of them in each set. They furnished three volts—"

Redding rose to his feet. "We're going out," he said.

"We can't go out, not without protection from the gas balls."

"We can't stay here, not without asbestos suits," he grimly answered.

"But I tell you Sam—"

There were shelves on each side of the pantry. She was rummaging through them.

"Light a match," she whispered. "Quick!"

Redding lit the match. Gerry snatched at the flashlight the flickering flame revealed, squealed with joy. "Mark! Give me your miniature transmitter. There isn't a second to lose. Quick! Give it to me."

She snatched it from his fingers, tore her fingernails prying the cover off. "Light another match. Keep on lighting them. Find a piece of paper and light it. I've got to see."

There was a magazine lying on the shelf over the cabinets. Redding snatched a page from it, rolled it into a tube, lit the end. By the tiny light from this flickering torch, he watched what Gerry Nash was doing.

From clips inside the miniature transmitter, she gently removed two little dry cells, each about as big as a pencil and about half an inch in length. Then she screwed the end from the flashlight, slid the cells out of it, and Redding realized what she was trying to do.

Gerry was trying to substitute the good cells from the flashlight for the dead cells in the protective radio transmitter.

"Good girl!" Redding whispered. "If that will only work! But how are you going to fit those flashlight batteries into the transmitter? They're three times as big as the little cells that came out, too big to fit inside the case."

"I'm going to tape them on the outside of the case and run wires from them to the terminals on the inside. Tape? I haven't any tape!" She glanced frantically around the room. "I've got to have something— Mark! Give me your shirt. I'll tear strips from it. Here, I'll hold the light."

Redding probably bettered the world's record in getting his coat and shirt off. She snatched it from his hands, ripped inch-wide strips from it.

Smoke was flowing through the cracks in the door that led to the kitchen. Gulick had set the fire at the back end of the house. Through the cracks at the window, Redding was beginning to catch glimpses of the trees outside. The air in the pantry was getting hot and heavy with smoke. Redding coughed, rolled another page of paper into a tube, lit the end. Gerry Nash worked.

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This girl was a first-class technician. She didn't have any tools except a bobby pin and a knife that Redding supplied but she knew her way around inside the miniature transmitter. Redding realized she must have had a first-class technical education. In addition, she had unquestionably helped her father with his experiments.

She needed wire. Six inches of wire was enough but there was no wire in the pantry. She got the wire she needed from her own protective transmitter.

"Hey!" Redding protested.

SHE didn't answer. Taping two of the flashlight cells to the back of the little aluminum case, she tied the contacts into place, held the device to her ear. A soft, almost out of hearing hum, was dimly audible. Her eyes glinted.

"It works," she said.

Slipping the cover into place, she bound it into position with another strip of cloth, then handed the generator to Redding.

"Here," she said.

Redding stared at her. "What about your generator?" he demanded. "What about fixing it up too?"

"There are only enough batteries for one. Anyhow I had to use wire out of mine to fix this one. You take it. It will protect you. I'll try to slip out—"

"Not this century!" Redding exploded. "I go out and save my neck and you stay here and burn to death!"

"I'll be all right, Mark. I feel I let you get into this—"

"*You* let me get into this!"

"Yes. I didn't have to bring you out here. I could have come back and said I couldn't find you."

"Gerry," Redding said softly. "Remind me sometime to tell you what I think of you. Right now all I can say is you're talking nonsense. We're in this together. Together, you understand. Will this generator protect both of us?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"We'll have to stay within two or three feet of each other. We'll be tied together. I'll be like a ball and chain around you. You can't move without me—"

"I can't imagine anything I would like better. Come on."

"But Gulick is out there. You'll have to move freely."

"So Gulick is out there," Redding answered. "And he has a gun." There was a thoughtful note in his voice. He reached for his coat, took out of the pocket the gun he had taken from Gulick at the helicopter. "Here. You take this gun. You take the generator. If I get shot. . . . No, don't try to argue me out of it. The generator ties us together. If I get shot, you run. You'll have a chance this way."

He pressed the protective transmitter into one hand, the gun into the other. She took the pistol readily enough but she didn't want to take the generator. Redding pushed open the door that led to the dining room. A gas ball swirled toward him.

He faced the luminous monstrosity. There was no point in trying to evade it. If the hastily improvised transmitter wouldn't protect them, they might as well die now.

The ball darted at them. Then, as it felt the subtle radiations from the little transmitter, it shot up to the ceiling, pulled back from them.

Redding sighed. "We're over that hurdle," he whispered. "Come on."

They went out the front door of the building. Flames leaping high over the kitchen threw grotesque dancing shadows on the ground. A gas ball saw them, darted at them, drew back before the radiations from the transmitter, fol-

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lowed along above them. Trying to keep in the shadow from the burning building, they raced for the trees, running hand in hand. If Gulick saw them, he did not chance a shot in their direction.

They reached the trees, dived out of sight among them.

"Gerry!" Redding exulted. "We've made it! We're out of the furnace and we've got protection from the gas balls."

"'Alten!" a harsh voice said near them. "Don't move. A machine pistol covering you I have got!"

"Schultz!" Gerry Nash gasped.

The Nazi agent was invisible in the darkness but Redding did not doubt the machine pistol was trained on them.

"Hah!" the Nazi grunted. "Those guns, drop."

Redding hesitated.

"I shoot!"

REDDING let his pistol slide from his hand. He heard Gerry's gun thud softly on the ground.

"Hah! Waiting I have been for Gulick to roast you two out of there. You, Geraldine, you I want. You can fly the plane."

"Schultz!" Gerry Nash gasped. "I thought—"

"You thought I was dead? No. Wasser is dead. When I saw him die, I realized something was wrong. Only a minute was needed to detect what it was. Then, naturally, I substituted flashlight batteries the dead cells for."

The German was no fool. He, too, had discovered that his protection was gone and had taken steps to remedy that defect.

"Now, we must go," Schultz continued. "But first, Geraldine, stand aside for one moment."

"What?"

"Stand aside."

"What for?"

"He wants you to stand aside so he can shoot me," Redding said. "He doesn't want the helicopter overburdened. Well—"

Crack!

Off in the darkness Gulick's rifle spoke again.

The bullet pinged within feet of them.

Schultz let go with the machine pistol, firing at the flash of Gulick's rifle. The rifle bullet had startled him. Automatically, without stopping to think, he answered the shot.

Like a leaping cat, Redding dived at him. The flash of the pistol revealed where Schultz was hiding. Aiming at the hand that held the gun, he struck downward with all the strength in his arms.

He hit the Nazi's wrist, knocked the gun from his hand.

"Donner—"

Redding was behind him, one arm around his throat, yanking him backward. They fell heavily.

The miracle was that the fall did not break Schultz' neck. It didn't. It didn't break Redding's hold either. It enabled him to jerk his elbow up under the German's chin, lock his hands together in the terrible strangle hold that is either broken quickly or has only one ending.

Schultz arched his back, tried to leap upward. He tried to kick backward, he clawed fiercely at Redding, pulled his hair, tried to find an eye to gouge. His breath was coming in great gasping sobs. Redding held grimly on. His biceps muscle was directly across the other's windpipe. He tightened his grip. Schultz stopped breathing, then a little by little he stopped struggling, and lay still. Redding held on. Only when the other's body was dead weight in his arms did he release his grip.

"Gerry?"

"Yes."

"Stay here with this monkey. If he

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revives, crack him on the head with your gun."

Redding was already searching through the Nazi's clothes for the protective transmitter. He found it. Flashlight batteries were wired across the back. He searched for the gun he had dropped, found it.

"Remember, if he moves, bop him. Let him have it, hard," he said.

"I'll keep him quiet," she promised.

Redding disappeared into the darkness.

"Good luck," her whisper followed him.

There, Redding thought, is a woman! She didn't ask him any questions, she didn't try to hold him back. She said, "Good luck," and let him go, and she knew where he was going.

THE whole back end of the living quarters was on fire now, the crackling flames curling upward in long tongues of yellow blaze. The gas balls seemed to be attracted to the fire. They were circulating over the entire area, globes of light revealed them drifting above the trees, slipping along a foot above the ground, but always they came back to the burning house as though fascinated by the heat or the light. They never entered the flames but occasionally one would dart upward with a tongue of blaze. They seemed to think the flames were alive, and possibly prey.

Redding watched the weird dance around the house. He shivered, then turned resolutely away. Somewhere within a circle not over two hundred yards in diameter, was Gulick. If he was looking for Gulick, Gulick was also looking for him.

In a hard school, Redding had learned to crawl silently. Keeping flat on the ground, he slipped away from the burning house. He wanted to get out into the darkness and look in toward the blaze. Then, when the biochemist moved, his body would be silhouetted against the flame, an easy target. Once he had located the biochemist, the stalk could begin.

Fallen logs, wiry grass, brush, barred his way. He crawled over or around the logs, the grass he crawled through, the brush he went around. Always he used his fingers to feel the way ahead of him. They were sensitive antennae, revealing obstructions, enabling him to move in absolute silence.

Under an old pine tree his probing fingers revealed a six-inch in diameter fallen limb ahead of him. A split second before the limb moved, he knew this limb hadn't fallen from any tree. It wasn't a limb. It was a man's leg.

Gulick had been sitting with his back against the pine tree, quietly waiting for his enemy to reveal himself outlined against the light of the burning house. Redding had crawled directly into him before either realized the other's presence.

Redding's pistol flashed upward.

Gulick kicked him in the face.

Redding dropped the pistol. He dived at Gulick's legs. The rifle thundered over his shoulder as he hit. His arms went around the biochemist's middle.

Gulick grunted. He tried to strike downward with the rifle barrel but Redding's head was buried in his chest, too close to use the barrel. He used the butt. Stars exploded inside Redding's head. He held on, shoved forward.

Gulick tripped, fell. Redding landed on top of him. The gun flew out of Gulick's hands. His fingers reached for Redding's eyes. Redding's fingers closed around his throat.

FOR a man with fat on him, Gulick had amazing strength. He grabbed Redding's wrists, broke the grip on his throat. Threshing on the ground, they

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struggled in the darkness. Each knew that no quarter would be asked and none given. Redding could hear Gulick breathing heavily. The biochemist rolled. Redding ended up on the bottom. Gulick tried to jerk loose. He managed to get to his feet. Redding realized the biochemist was trying to get away. He grabbed him around the legs, threw him heavily.

Gulick grunted. Redding grabbed him around the middle. In the side pocket of Gulick's coat, he could feel a hard flat object like a cigarette case.

Gulick never did know what happened. To him, it seemed that he was able to wrench free from the arms that were holding him. Freedom was what he was seeking. He had lost his rifle but there was another rifle in the laboratory. He knew he didn't have a chance in a rough and tumble fight against the iron-hard man who fought so silently and with such ferocious strength. If he could get away and get the rifle—

When he managed to wrench himself free, he ran, stumbling through the darkness. Suddenly shots sounded behind him. Heavy slugs drilled the air around him, thudded into trees, screamed as they bounced off. He knew Redding had found a gun and was shooting at him. He ran faster.

The gas ball came down from over the trees and dropped on him. He screamed. And screamed again. Amazed, incredulous terror was in those screams. The gas ball fastened on to him, seeped into his body—

Redding lowered the smoking pistol. He listened to the screams. He saw a second gas ball follow the first, a third follow the second. Then they came in droves, diving downward like hawks screaming after their prey.

The screams sobbed into sudden silence.

Redding stood without moving. He looked down at the little flat cigarette case in his hand. It was a protective radio transmitter. He had stolen it from Gulick's pocket while they were struggling.

"He never knew I had it," he whispered. "He never knew I had his protection. . . . I wonder if he ever knew he got exactly what was coming to him—"

Flames from the burning house leaped higher into the sky. Most of the gas balls had left the flames now. They were all clustered around a certain spot off at the edge of the darkness. Redding watched in silence, then turned and walked back to where Gerry Nash waited. He walked erect, making no effort to move quietly. She was still waiting.

* * *

Later, when the helicopter lifted from the swamp island, the flames from the burned house had died down. Off toward the east another brighter fire was burning—the rising sun.

CATCHING THE AKUAKU

★ **By FRAN FERRIS** ★

EASTER ISLAND, in its early existence, shared the luck of most all Polynesia in being completely free from most diseases. Cannibalism had given them a fairly good knowledge of their inner anatomy, and their treatment of wounds received in battle was quite effective. Besides injuries they had little to worry about except indigestion, the result of poor eating habits. Like all other Polynesians, they had no resistance against disease brought by the white man. Smallpox practically obliterated them, then came social diseases and tuberculosis to help fill their burial cairns. They were without adequate medical attention till recently when they stocked a few

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staple remedies. But they were shy about taking white man's medicine, and were worse off psychologically than when they were depending solely on a sorcerer to fight off death and disease which they thought was traceable to one common influence, the akuakus, or evil spirits.

The soothsayers agreed that the best way to get rid of the akuaku was to lure him into a hole and catch him in a net. If they got him out of the house the patient was able to survive, but if the patient died they knew they had failed to trap the akuaku. Other sorcerers had a little different technique which usually had better results. They didn't believe in catching the akuaku in a hole away from the house of the patient because it gave him too much chance to get away from even the most skillful soothsayer. So their idea was to remove the patient from his house to a shelter previously arranged, or if the weather permitted, into the open air. Then after much hocus-pocus, they would hang nets over the entrance to the house and burn it down. Very few akuakus ever survived. The patient would most always get better for being moved into the sunshine or into a clean shelter.

Feasting was a principal part in celebrating the dead as it was in all other religious activities of the island. After all the food was eaten, the body was wrapped in bark cloth and braided grass and carried to a ahu, or burial cairn, and laid on a temporary table of sticks. Members of the family took up positions on each side of the ahu to watch night and day over the remains. This precaution was practical as well as ceremonious, as sometimes a skull might be stolen and used for minor sorcery. After a few days of this, the distant relatives went home and only the immediate family kept watch, night and day, till the body had dried and fallen apart. The bones were then gathered up and thrown into a cairn and the period of mourning was officially over.

THE TUNNEL OF LOVE

By H. R. STANTON

TWO hundred and sixty-five years have passed since the death of Nell Gwyn, toast of the London stage and mistress to King Charles II, still every now and then something happens to bring back her memory. Such was the case when recently a workman who was loosening bomb-blasted stones at Windsor Guildhall poked his pneumatic drill into an unknown secret of the romantic couple. The drill plunged into space hurling the workman to the ground. It seems that he had broken into a tunnel that led from the king's castle to Nell Gwyn's home. When the tunnel was cleared of debris, it exposed an archway of Spanish marble, with walls of the 800 foot passage built of tooled limestone. The tunnel was four feet wide and seven feet high. At the other end was another marble archway fifteen feet under the site of another demolished house. This was the second tunnel known to have been used by the romantic king to make his visits to the beautiful first lady of the stage. The other was discovered during the war in the Chelsea section. It connected two other mansions that were occupied by the king and Nell from time to time. One end of the Chelsea tunnel starts at Sanford Manor House, where Nell Gwyn supported her mother until 1679, when the old lady, intoxicated, accidentally drowned herself. The other end of the tunnel is under the turf of the Horticultural Ground of Royal Hospital, once the site of one of King Charles's castles. This passage was also revealed by a Nazi bomb. King Charles was the playboy of his day, and he made sure that he would never be cut off from his sweet Nell no matter where the affairs of State called him.

Nell Gwyn could not read or write. She was born in an alley leading off Drury Lane, and neighbors took the mother and babe in. Nell became what we might call a cigarette girl, only she sold oranges at the Drury Lane Theatre. She was enticingly beautiful and soon became a favorite with the night crowds. She was offered a role in the theatre and made good. She was courted by nobles four times her age before she was sixteen. Then when King Charles attended a command performance, she stole his heart. She was always true to him although he could never marry her because she was a commoner. She kept her good temper and charming smile, and apparently was satisfied with her lot—the privilege of a girl born in a gutter rising to become the king's favorite. She bore him two sons which he took care of in style. On his death bed, King Charles asked his brother to take care of Nell and the boys. King James kept his promise and paid Nell's debts from the Secret Service funds and educated her sons.

Historians describe Nell as the most beloved of the King's many favorites, and say that she never tried to influence the Prime Ministers, but that she did induce Charles to create a foundation for today's Chelsea Hospital.

Nell died at the age of 36. She was buried in the churchyard of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. The Archbishop of Canterbury, who preached her sermon, had much to say in her favor.

* * *

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He played the Largo softly and it seemed as if the night wind was whispering an accompaniment to it—for it was Peggy's music

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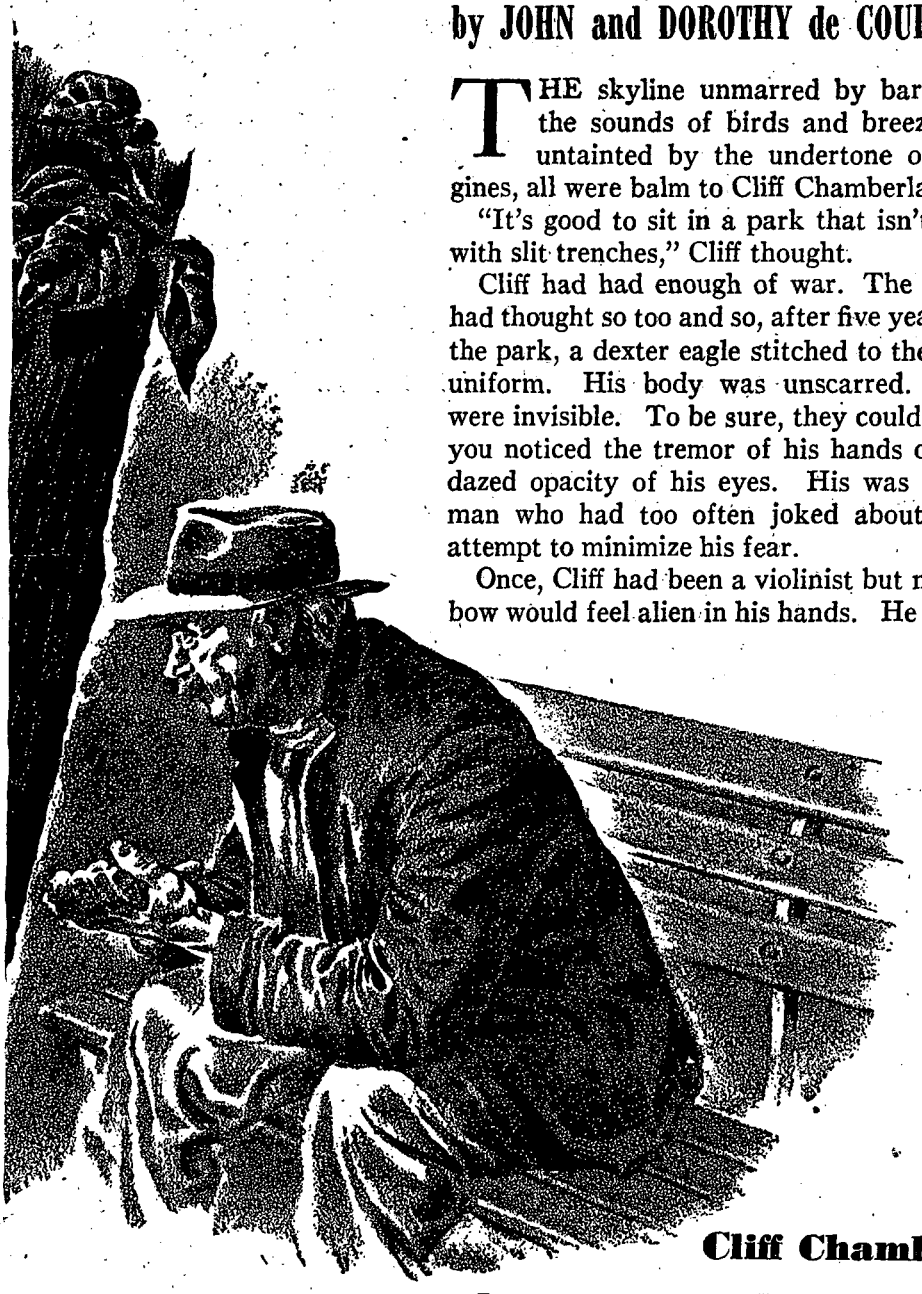
EVENSONG

by JOHN and DOROTHY de COURCY



THE skyline unmarred by barrage balloons, the sounds of birds and breeze and insects untainted by the undertone of aircraft engines, all were balm to Cliff Chamberlain's soul.

"It's good to sit in a park that isn't criss-crossed with slit trenches," Cliff thought.

Cliff had had enough of war. The flight surgeon had thought so too and so, after five years, Cliff sat in the park, a dexter eagle stitched to the breast of his uniform. His body was unscarred. Cliff's scars were invisible. To be sure, they could be seen when you noticed the tremor of his hands or the slightly dazed opacity of his eyes. His was the face of a man who had too often joked about death in an attempt to minimize his fear.

Once, Cliff had been a violinist but now, a rosined bow would feel alien in his hands. He hadn't played

Cliff Chamberlain's soul was wrapped up in a song — but the music wasn't really his

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since the night he and Peggy had parted.

"If she'd only written me one letter!" Cliff muttered. "She doesn't care about me. I've GOT to forget her. I've GOT to start all over again. Living seems so senseless, so futile!"

They had been happy together until that night five years ago. Then, for no reason, it had all ended. Cliff couldn't even remember what they had quarreled about. She just left the house and he waited two days for her to return. When she didn't Cliff joined the Army.

He had just come from the house. Peggy had been there recently. It was just as he had left it. Anyone could have cleaned it but somehow, Cliff knew Peg had done it. The only thing that had been taken from the house was the concerto.

"Why not?" Cliff shrugged. "I wrote it for Peg."

He had left the house hurriedly after staying only a few minutes. He was afraid to see Peggy now. Maybe someday, when his fingers stopped trembling——. Cliff tried to think of other things. The thoughts of Peggy and his former happiness hurt too much.

The sun was low on the horizon and the air was losing its pleasant warmth. Cliff stood up and stretched. He lit a cigarette and started walking out of the park.

"Exit Cliff Chamberlain, the virtuoso! Enter Cliff Chamberlain, the mechanic, the plumber, the grocery clerk!" he snorted.

Cliff turned suddenly. He must be wrong! No. He heard it again! A violin playing softly some melody strange to him! He stifled the twinge in his breast. Cliff was tempted to leave the park as quickly as he could but he didn't. Slowly, hesitantly, he walked toward the source of the music. The violin broke off abruptly but began the same strain again, familiar, yet unfamiliar, like a name almost but not quite remembered.

It reminded Cliff of the way Peggy used to hum when she was working around the house. He wrenched his thoughts away from Peggy. Almost viciously, he ground out his cigarette under his heel. He stood silently, trying to concentrate on the music, striving to shut out the image of Peggy's face. But her memory came back as persistently as did the few bars played on the violin. He could feel the softness of her hair against his cheek; hear her asking again, "What's bothering my little genius?"

"Stop it! Stop it!" he growled.

AGAIN, he forced his mind to the theme, sought to label it, but it was no use! Resolutely, Cliff strode down the path toward the music. He rounded a turn and saw an elderly man on a bench fingering his violin in meditation. Beside him was an open portfolio filled with scoring paper.

"I hope you'll pardon me for intruding," Cliff began, "but I can't seem to place that melody."

The elderly man looked up.

Cliff started slightly and exclaimed, "Jacob Sari!"

A quick flash of recognition illuminated Jacob Sari's face. "Vell, vell, vell! Clifford Chamberlain! And in the army too!"

"WAS in the army," Cliff corrected. "I've been out for three days."

"Dat's fine, my boy," said Jacob Sari, extending his hand. "My but you're looking good! I guess it is dat army food, yah? You are looking like an athlete rather dan a musician!"

Cliff released the old man's hand, smiling. "I feel more like an athlete too," he admitted. "Oh by the way, what was that you were playing?"

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"Oh dat? Dat is a new composition dat I hope to play next month at my final concert. It is not yet complete, but you like it?"

"Very much," Cliff replied earnestly.

"I come to vat you call the turning point. Vat I need now is a truly inspired theme. Then I can complete it. Maybe you like to hear de last part, yah? It is not long."

"Would you play it please?" Cliff asked.

"Gladly, gladly!" Jacob Sari replied, his face wreathed in smiles. "Dis is de andante," he added unnecessarily.

Delicately, the old man's fingers began to extract music, great music from his instrument. Cliff was swept back into his old life. He lived and breathed with the music. He listened with an appreciation that only a musician can possess. Then jarringly he fell back to the world where he was Cliff Chamberlain, the washed out pilot, the man who hadn't played for years.

Suddenly Jacob Sari stopped. "In here it is dat I should insert de great theme. Then I would play vat you just heard. After dat, I bring back de yet unwritten theme and build it up and elaborate on it until it reaches de cresendo!" The old man paused and laughed heartily. "All dat I need now is a great composer to write de great theme, yah?"

Cliff frowned. "What should the theme express?"

"Just people," Jacob Sari answered. "Dat's vat it is all written about. People! People being born, people vorking, people playing, people growing old and people dying. I thought maybe de theme would express sort of de eternal hope or maybe de striving for someting better. You tink dat's a good idea, yah?"

"I don't think the average person has too much to hope for," Cliff said dejectedly and unhappily.

JACOB SARI shook his head. "Dat's a defeatist attitude. Dere is always hope! Look even at me. I am an old man but I still have hope! You are young and have a brilliant career ahead of you! You have a wife and maybe even a little Clifford by now!"

Cliff's face was white. "Margaret and I aren't together anymore. We—separated—when—I joined the army."

Jacob Sari was pained. "Oh, I am sorry. I did not know or I would haf said nothing. Please forgive me! I am getting old and sometimes I talk too much."

"—It's not your fault," Cliff sighed. "You couldn't possibly have known."

"I see now why you tink dere is no hope left in de world! But maybe you get along anyway. I vas very sad once ven I vas young but I vas able to find comfort in my music. Maybe dat's why I became a violinist."

Cliff laughed harshly. "I'm afraid you've got me even there!" He extended his hands to Jacob Sari. "Look at these!" The shaking was pronounced now. "I couldn't even HOLD a violin!"

For a moment the air seemed thick, then Jacob Sari stirred.

"I admit you haf a problem dere but would you not be worse off if you vere deaf like Beethoven?"

"Could I be worse off?"

"I am not a doctor! I would not know," Sari argued. "I only know vat my ears tell me." He picked up his violin, plucked the strings tentatively and placed it in Cliff's lap. "You play!" he commanded, "den maybe I agree with you."

Cliff's face would have been no different had Jacob Sari put a snake in his lap. "I can't!" he began. "It would be terrible! I'm not like a beginner.

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I KNOW how I should play! And I know I can't! Look at my hands! Automatic vibrato!"

"No arguments! Play!" the older man said sternly.

"But I haven't any music," Cliff protested. "And I don't remember a thing! Honestly, I don't!"

Silently Jacob Sari handed to Cliff his folio of music paper. Cliff shrugged and opened it at random. He tucked the violin under his chin and withdrew it, shaking his head.

"No Jacob! It's no use! I'm just not a violinist anymore."

"Prove it!" Sari insisted. "I don't believe you until you prove it! All dis talk means nothing to Jacob Sari's ears!"

Cliff raised the bow and touched it to the strings. Gingerly, he began to play.

A moment later Jacob Sari waved his hand. "Stop! Dat is terrible!"

"Well I warned you," Cliff sighed.

"You warned me of nothing! You can play but you are thinking about your fingers! Could a centipede walk if he thought about his legs?"

"I can't help it! I just can't play anymore!"

"Dat's nonsense!" Jacob Sari retorted angrily. "You have written good music. Play something of your own. Vat it is, I don't care!"

"I can't remember any of the things I've written. Only a few opening bars of my concerto."

"Dat's enough! Play dose. Maybe den you remember more!"

Cliff shrugged again. Haltingly at first, he started to play his concerto. Peggy's concerto! He made a mistake.

"Stop looking at me!" Jacob Sari ordered. "Look out dere at de sunset!"

CLIFF turned and looked. Again he began the concerto. Gradually he forget his fingers. This was Peggy's concerto. He felt almost sacreligious. The music with the memories it recalled brought her back to him. He played to her from his heart.

Without realizing it, Cliff was playing music he hadn't thought of for five years. Music he didn't think he would ever remember.

"Largo," he thought. "Slow and stately."

It was sad. His whole being was crying out through the violin for Peggy. The feeling, the soul of the music was almost tangible.

Sari leaned forward on the bench, his lips parted, his eyes bright with excitement. "Wunderbar!" he whispered to himself. Like any musician, his own mind was filling in the orchestral accompaniment.

Swiftly, Cliff's fingers were losing the stiffness imposed on them by time. Behind Jacob Sari, others were gathering, onlookers, passers by, captivated by the magic this tall soldier was creating. The music swelled. It tugged at people's hearts. It brought back memories of youthful courtship; it painted a picture of a beautiful world. Some of the listeners were musicians; some were not. But all were caught by the spell. Cliff's music lived, it laughed, it cried.

Jacob Sari's eyes were closed now. This was a thing apart from ordinary music.

It was almost dark when Cliff stopped at the end of the second movement.

Jacob Sari's eyes opened. "Gott!" he murmured. "I would give my life to play dat concerto at my concert!"

Cliff's eyes clouded. "I—I—don't have the music," he stammered. "It—it—would—take too long to reorchestrate it."

"Never mind dat now!" Jacob Sari

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almost shouted. "Play de finale. I vill not move until I haf heard de rest!"

Again Cliff played. The spectators didn't move. The magnificence of the finale outshadowed the preceding movements but it brought pain to Cliff's heart. In this movement, he had expressed his love for Peg. His eyes were wet and a tear trickled down his cheek. This music wasn't TO Peg, he thought. It *was* Peg!

The last traces of bitterness and resentment were washed away. In their places was left an emptiness that could only be filled by Peggy.

"I'll find her wherever she is," Cliff decided. "I'll crawl on my hands and knees and tell her what a blind, stupid fool I've been."

He smiled and joyous happiness was reflected in the music. Then it was over.

Jacob Sari opened his eyes. "Dat music! Dat music!! I haf got to haf it! I postpone my concert! Anyting!"

Cliff stood for a moment still facing the darkened horizon, savoring his peace and happiness. He was startled by a rustle of applause. He turned and saw his audience for the first time. Even as Cliff watched, the small group of onlookers melted away. All but one. She came forward. Cliff struggled to find his voice. Even in the semi-darkness, he knew her.

"Peggy," he said hoarsely.

Hesitantly, Peggy held forth a leather folio. "I—I—came—back—to return—your concerto. I just happened——."

Cliff ignored the portfolio and gathered her into his arms. Her body was rigid for an instant, then desperately, she clung to him.

Jacob Sari paid no attention to them. He picked up the fallen concerto and held it under one arm as though it might escape. He sat down on the bench again, running his fingers up and down the seam of the folio.

"By golly! If he can play like dat, maybe it is a good ting dis is my last concert!"

Reluctantly he lay the concerto down and replaced his violin in the case. The wind rustled the leaves of his own composition which lay beside him. He disgustedly closed the cover and dropped it into his briefcase, his nose wrinkling as though the paper emitted an unpleasant odor. He glanced over his shoulder at Cliff and Peggy dimly revealed against the starlit sky.

"I give dem another five minutes," he mumbled. "Den we go eat. Even geniuses got to eat!"

SOON, the park was deserted except for two beings. They had been beside Cliff ever since his arrival at the park. Cliff had not seen them, nor had anyone else. Once, Cliff had even walked through the space occupied by the smaller of the two. The larger, Lanis Arn, finally spoke. It was not speech, as men understand the term, but a voiceless, soundless, communication.

"Do you understand why I have caused all this to come to pass!"

The other concentrated for a moment. "Not completely, My Teacher. I know that behind this lies a greater purpose but that purpose is not yet clear."

"In time, you would understand," Lanis explained, "but to make this illustration more clear, I shall tell you now. Soon, a man will listen to the concerto and be swayed by it. Through it, he will begin to understand the principal of love. This man now plans to murder his best friend. He will change his mind and his best friend will

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live. In ten years, this friend will devise a new means for combating virus diseases. In a year, Clifford Chamberlain will write another composition and it will be heard by a man who now hopes to become a dictator. His emotions will be touched and he will begin to think about heartache, pain and bloodshed that he is preparing to loose on the world. Soon he will come to understand the Great Principal. He will then devote his resources to helping humanity rather than destroying it. Now do you understand why we have done all this tonight?"

The smaller figure seemed ashamed as he answered. "I see that I still have much to learn."

"Not too much now," Lanis encouraged. "Look back and see how far you have come. Remember, at one time, you were the Emperor, Nero!"

THE END

SHRINKING HUMAN HEADS

By JUNE LURIE

THE shrinking of a head is a ritualistic process. After the warrior has killed his victim he cuts the head off as close to the body as possible, brings it back to his witch doctor. The witch doctor protects him from the ghost of the victim by squirting tobacco up each nostril. But this is only a temporary precaution.

The following day the making of the tsantsa or shrunken head begins. Just the warriors, the Old Man of the tribe and the witch doctors are allowed to take part in this process. An old pot is used, one that is cracked and chipped, and three stones from the river bed are heated in the pot till they are colored. In the meantime the muka, or head, has been cut from the apex of the skull downward to the neck. The scalp is then drawn off the skull till it is only attached to the face. Then this is carefully cut away. Then the neck opening is sewed to a ring. The head is then boiled in water for hours. This shrinks the head a bit and also keeps it from spoiling. Then the three stones are brought into use as soon as the head is dried. One of the hot stones is taken from the pot and dropped into the skull and rolled around to melt out the fat. As soon as one stone cools another is used. Then hot sand is used to complete the job. After taking the sand out each time the witch doctor scrapes away the tissue in the rapidly shrinking head. This goes on till it is about the size of an orange. Palm pegs which were stuck through the lips so that the dead man could not utter curses are then removed and replaced by cords. The tsantsa is now ready for the final celebration and victory feast. During the entire time of shrinking the warrior has been in a process of purification. He has been chaste and taken only liquid foods. After a feast of pork and monkey, drums are sounded and the dancing begins. The warrior has a new tsantsa to hang about his waist and the spirit of the dead man to serve him forever.

FEAST OF THE LANTERNS

By PETE BOGG

IN JAPAN the souls of the dead return to their former home once a year, and a festival called the Feast of the Lanterns is held to welcome them. They come during the evening of the thirteenth day of the seventh month of the old calendar which is toward the end of August. As they come at night, it is necessary to light their way. So they fasten brightly colored lanterns over the tombs in the burying grounds. There are so many that the hills are lighted for miles around. Lights of many hues and also candles are lit and set along the streets and in front of houses. Fires are started in the streets so that the whole city is bathed in light. As soon as the sun sets, all the families go out to meet their dead. When they come to the place where they think the dead souls have asssembled, they welcome them and ask them to rest after their long journey and to have something to eat. After giving them time to eat and rest, they escort them home, talking happily with them all the way. A banquet is laid out, and places are set for the dead who are supposed to absorb the ethereal essence of the food. After the meal, the living go from house to house visiting the souls of their dead friends. This running about town lasts for three days, and then the times comes for the souls to return to their graves. Fires are again built in the streets, and the people again take them back to the place where they met them three days before. In some places the people send lanterns and provisions out to sea in small boats for the spirits who have a long way to go.

There is always the fear that some poor souls have lagged behind, or have hidden away so as not to be made to leave the place of their former life and those they love. These reluctant spirits have to be hunted out and sent on their way. To do this the people throw stones on their roofs and go through all the rooms with clubs which they swing savagely to chase away the lingering spirits.

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BELLEROPHON AND PEGASUS

★ By LESLIE PHELPS ★

THE story of the winged horse, Pegasus, and his master Bellerophon, has furnished the basic theme for a number of interesting stories of fantasy. Not long ago, in this magazine, the novelette "Mr. Beller and the Winged Horse" appeared—an excellent take-off on the story of the mythical horse. But there was little connection between Mr. Beller and his early Greek counterpart, Bellerophon. The original story from Greek mythology is a fascinating tale in itself—and remember—the Greeks were no slouches at contriving fantasies of the first order. Even today our speech is punctuated with allusions to that mythology.

Bellerophon was supposedly the son of a Corinthian king who for undescribed reasons, committed an impulsive, unpremeditated murder. In order to avoid punishment he fled his father's court to the court of King Proteus who purified him of his crime. But Proteus' wife Antea, a lovely young thing, fell in love with Bellerophon, a love which he did not return. Naturally she slandered him to Proteus.

Proteus liked him so well, however, that he could not bring himself to kill Bellerophon personally, so he sent him to a friend's court, the court of Iobates, with a sealed, cryptic letter telling that the bearer should be killed. But Bellerophon was favored of the gods. Iobates got to like him also.

After a while, Iobates read the tablet, but having come to like and know Bellerophon, decided that he couldn't do the job himself either. He sought for a way out. He sent him to perform tasks which would undoubtedly result in his death.

Bellerophon prayed to the gods though, invoking their protection, and before setting out to kill the Chimaera, a monster of three parts—lion, goat and dragon—received a magic bridle which was to enable him to capture Pegasus, the immortal winged horse. Quickly Bellerophon caught his flying steed and without difficulty rose into the air and slew the Chimaera. The battle was a furious affair because the lion-section of the monster breathed fire. Yet such was the speed of Pegasus that Bellerophon was enabled to avoid the flames.

When he returned to Iobates' court, Bellerophon was sent on another mission, the defeat of a fierce tribe of warriors. With Pegasus, he vanquished them. Next on his list of tasks came the battle with the Amazons, whom Bellerophon also beat thoroughly.

Finally Iobates realized that Bellerophon was protected by the gods, and that it was useless to try to kill him. Bellerophon married Iobates' daughter and shared in the rule of the land.

But owning Pegasus was too much for Bellerophon. It was something like owning a supercharged, high-speed racing car. Bellerophon became swollen with pride and vanity. All this time he had led a more than charmed life and had escaped the dangers of a thousand lifetimes. His head got considerably bigger and he thought he could do no wrong. He decided to try to ride to heaven on Pegasus to see, out of idle curiosity, just what the gods were like. Zeus observed all this, and in spite of his liking for the now rather obnoxious youth, became offended at his audacity and decided to do something about it. Bellerophon was riding high on Pegasus, when a gadfly sent by Zeus stung the winged horse, who bucked and threw his rider. Bellerophon plummeted to Earth. Still his life was charmed and he landed unhurt, though Pegasus was gone forever.

In their anger with him, the gods decided that Bellerophon, who till now had been their favorite, should be suitably punished. What better way to make the youth's life miserable than sending him to the loneliest places on Earth. But even this wasn't necessary. Bellerophon was evidently a good "guy" at heart, for he became seized with remorse and regret at the way he had lived. He was so moved by the thoughts of how blessed his life had been and how foolishly he had thrown away his gifts, that he was seized with a terrible melancholy—probably mythology's first first-class manic-depressive. The upshot of it all was that he followed, of his own accord, the intention of the punitive gods for he wandered the rest of his life in the most desolate and barren spots of the world.

So goes the original Greek legend of Bellerophon and Pegasus. But on a number of occasions this has been changed and expanded. Among the innumerable legends that are associated with Alexander the Great is the one that he was Bellerophon in disguise. In fact, it is said that he believed himself to be the Greek hero in his less rational moments, of which he is reputed to have had many.

The city of Corinth erected an altar to Bellerophon, over the grave of Poseidon, god of the sea, and the crumbled remains are to be seen today. Pegasus is recalled a thousand times today and in a thousand ways—from the names of aircraft to the bric-a-brac statuary that dominates some cheap stores.

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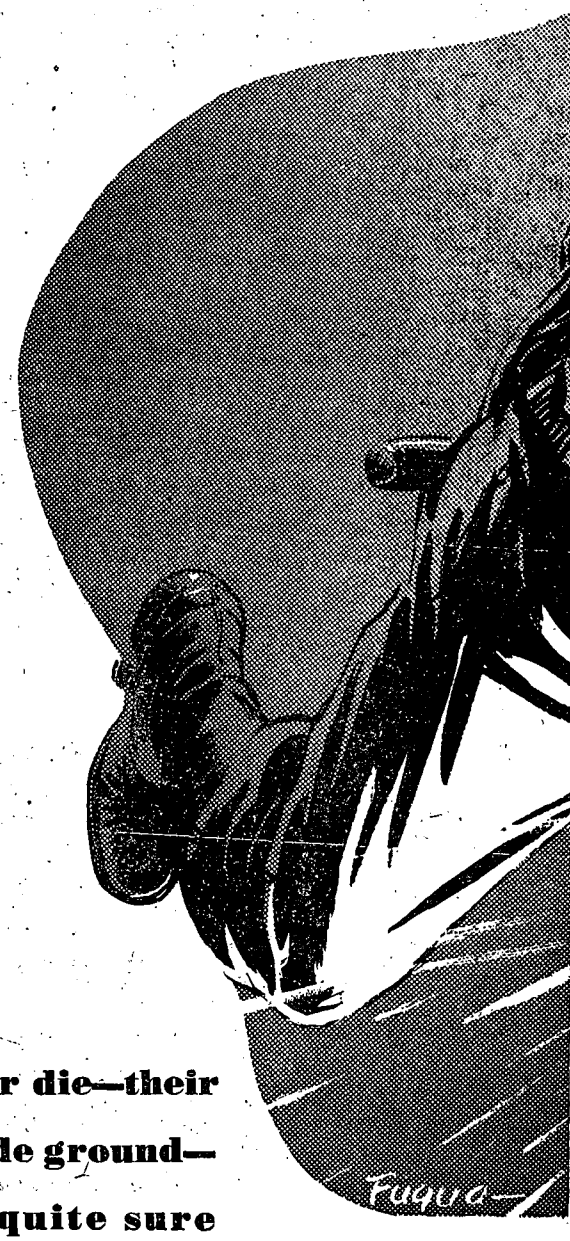
ORDERS FOR WILLIE WESTON

by WILLIAM P. McGIVERN



WHEN Private First class Willie Weston realized that the grenade was going off in a matter of seconds he thought with classic detachment that it had been a most peculiar sort of day.

First there had been that business of the orders. . . .

He had been told that morning he was being transferred to another outfit. The first sergeant instructed him to report to the orderly room for his orders.

Willie had gone to the orderly room as instructed and told the Charge of Quarters what he wanted. The CQ was a corporal with nine months of service which made him quite an old campaigner in this new army. He picked a copy of Willie's orders from a basket

Old soldiers never die—their reward comes on the parade ground—but Willie Weston wasn't quite sure

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The grenade burst before he could smother it completely . . .

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and glanced at them perfunctorily.

"You leave at eleven this morning," he said. "You're going to B company, third regiment—"

He stopped talking and looked at the orders with new interest. Finally he looked up frowning. "These orders are snafued. Hold it a minute and I'll check with the captain."

He came from behind his desk and went into the captain's office. Willie heard him talking, then the captain's voice sounded: "Weston, come in here."

Willie walked nervously into the Captain's presence, came to attention and saluted.

"At ease, Weston," the captain said, returning the salute casually. He was a muscular, graying man of about forty. He had a copy of Willie's orders in one hand and he rubbed his chin with the other.

"These orders aren't right," he said. "According to this you're being transferred to the 127th. Infantry. You'd have a helluva job finding that outfit."

"I know, sir," Willie said. "The 127th. was deactivated at Munich in forty-five. They fought from Africa all the way to Berlin and . . ." Willie floundered and was silent.

The captain glanced curiously at Willie. "How'd you remember all that?"

"I—I used to read about it, sir. The war, I mean. It was like a hobby."

"Hmmn. Well, carry on, Weston. I'll get this straightened out at Headquarters." He glanced again at the orders and smiled. "The 127th! Might as well try to send you to the old Rainbow division. Well," he paused, still looking at the orders. "Would you like a copy of this as a souvenir?"

"Yes, sir. Very much."

"It's probably as close as you'll ever get to a combat division. That's all, Weston."

Willie took the mimeographed sheet from the captain, saluted and went out to find the battery. They were on the parade ground listening to a lecture on booby traps and grenades. The men were squatted in a semi-circle listening to a lieutenant who was trying vainly to keep them interested.

Willie found a seat in the front row and squatted down. He tried to listen but it was impossible. His thoughts strayed to the orders in his pocket.

The 127th. Infantry! One of the real glory outfits. Willie had followed their exploits for three years. He had been a kid then, fourteen years old and the war had been a fascinating parade which he would have given his soul to join. But it had ended when he was seventeen and he could still recall his half-guilty feeling of disappointment.

WHEN he was eighteen he had been drafted into the peacetime army which wasn't the same thing at all. There were no heroes, no romance, no boom of guns to counterpoint the cadence of marching men; there was just gray routine and other lonely kids of high school age.

That was about when the business with the grenade happened. Willie was too lost in his thoughts to remember just how it happened, but he heard everyone yelling suddenly and then they were scrambling away from him in every direction. He heard a lieutenant yell, "Hit the ground!" and then he saw the grenade.

It was right in front of him, a peculiar looking thing with a handle on it, quite different from the other grenades he'd seen in the army. He stared in fascination, too surprised to move.

He was conscious of the hot sun on his neck and the baked, dusty ground; he heard shouts and running feet and he heard a horrible little ticking sound

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coming from the strange looking grenade.

That was when he realized it was going off any second.

There was no time to run. There was hardly time to feel fear. He stood up and threw himself toward the grenade without any precise idea of what might happen.

He heard a noise then that was so vast his ears had trouble assimilating it. It was all around him like fog and it seemed to come through his body, his pores and his lungs, as well as his ears. There was pain for a moment but it was too great to hurt very much.

That was all there was to it. The sound and the pain and then the darkness . . .

He didn't know what to expect when he opened his eyes. The pain was gone and it was quiet now. He was standing in what appeared to be an orderly room. There was a youthful second lieutenant sitting behind a desk, glancing at some papers.

Willie was very surprised by this deal.

The young lieutenant who had unruly blond hair and clean blue eyes finally looked at him and grinned.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," Willie said blankly.

Then he remembered a number of things, chief of which was the courtesy he should accord the lieutenant's gold bars. He snapped to attention and saluted.

The lieutenant smiled good naturedly and came around the desk. "Relax, soldier," he said. "We don't use that stuff here. My name's Pete." He stuck out a hand.

Willie brought his hand down from his forehead and shook hands gingerly with the lieutenant.

"I'm a little mixed up, sir," he said.

"Never mind the sir. What's on your mind?"

"Well a grenade went off and I was pretty close to it," Willie said. He looked around the neat orderly room as if expecting to find the walls sagging from blast. "It's all very funny," he went on.

"You'll get used to it," the lieutenant named Pete said. "I got mine with a mortar. Took me a while to get oriented when I got here."

"Well, where am I?"

"This is B company, 127th. Infantry," the Lieutenant said.

"But you were all killed!" Willie gasped.

The lieutenant chuckled. "Brother, say that again. I guess we got expended faster than any outfit in the war. Set a record for casualties, I think." He seemed quite proud of this fact.

"Then I'm—" Willie couldn't finish the sentence.

"That's right," the lieutenant said. "You're Kaput. Don't worry about it. The big thing is that you're in the wrong outfit now. Do you have your orders with you?"

"Orders?" Willie shook his head. He fumbled automatically through his pockets and his fingers touched the mimeographed sheet his captain had given him as a souvenir.

"YOU got 'em," Pete said. He reached over and plucked the papers from Willie's pocket. "I'll see where you're supposed to go and get you started on your way. I don't see how you got here in the first place."

He opened the paper and glanced at the orders.

"You see," he said, "we're a deactivated outfit. We don't take any recruits."

"I see," Willie said, feeling strangely inadequate.

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"You should probably have gone to—"

He stopped and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. "Holy Smoke! Something is really fouled up. These orders are made out for us." He stuck the paper in front of Willie's eyes and pointed unbelievingly at the typed instructions. "See that? B company, 127th. Infantry. Plain as the nose on your face. What d'ya know?"

"It's a mistake, I guess," Willie said.

"Why, sure it is. Boy what a mess!"

"I was going to be transferred," Willie said. "They cut the wrong orders. I had 'em with me when the grenade went off."

The lieutenant frowned thoughtfully. "Yeah, that's the deal. You had the orders on you when you got it. So Headquarters sent you over here. Probably didn't bother checking it," he said gloomily. "Stupid so-and-sos."

Willie gulped. "Does Headquarters up here get things fouled up, too?"

The lieutenant shook his head despairingly. "Brother they make more mistakes here than anywhere else." He grinned suddenly. "But it gives us something to gripe about. And by the way. I wouldn't say up here when you're referring to this place."

Willie looked at him in horror. "Is it down here?"

The lieutenant looked around cautiously, then leaned closer to Willie. "It's hard to say," he said confidentially. "Sometimes I'm not sure. Just play it safe. Say 'here'."

"All right," Willie said weakly.

"Now," the lieutenant said, "I'll get this thing straightened out. Meantime you might as well have chow with us."

"I am hungry," Willie said.

"Well, we'll take good care of you. I'll find one of the boys to show you around. Sometime this afternoon I'll probably have the dope on these orders and I'll look you up. You should be with your regular outfit by this evening."

"Thanks a lot, sir." Willie said.

"Now watch that," the lieutenant said warningly. "I'm easy going and I don't mind that Sir business. But some officers up here are pretty chicken and they'll raise hell if you don't Sir 'em."

"I'll watch it," Willie said, feeling light headed.

The lieutenant led him out to the company street. Willie looked about in awe. This wasn't a GI company street. There was a wide expanse of bright green grass that looked cool and fresh. Flanking this wide avenue were barracks, but they weren't GI either. The barracks were made of glass brick that caught the soft sun in thousands of sparkling lights.

Outside the orderly room door a lanky, wide-shouldered sergeant was lying in the sun. He had an arm flung over his face and was snoring peacefully.

"Hey, Mac!" the lieutenant called. "Wake up a minute."

The sergeant woke slowly; he took his arm away from his face and blinked his eyes and then rolled on his side.

"What's up, Pete?" he asked lazily.

The lieutenant nodded at Willie. "This guy got sent to us by mistake. How about taking care of him until I get it straightened out?"

Mac got to his feet and grinned at Willie. "Sure," he said. He stuck out a big hard hand. "Glad to know you. My name's Mac."

"I'm Willie Weston," Willie said.

He swallowed hard when he saw the decorations Mac was wearing on the left breast of his khaki shirt. There was an ETO ribbon with seven battle stars; a Purple Heart; the bright red and white of a Silver Star; a DSC with

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an Oak Leaf cluster. Above these was a blue ribbon with seven small stars arranged in a double triangle formation. The Medal of Honor!

Mac was homely. He had a red, angular face and twinkling gray eyes. His hair was black and rumpled and he needed a shave. He didn't stand the way a soldier should, Willie thought. His shoulders slumped, one leg was bent at the knee and there were two buttons off his shirt. But there was something relaxed and quiet about him that gave the impression that he could move in a hurry if he cared to.

"I'll take you over to the barracks, Willie," Mac said. "You can meet some of the guys and get in a little sacktime if you want to."

Pete, the lieutenant, smiled at Willie, then slapped him on the shoulder.

"I'll get you straightened out on orders," he said.

"Thanks," Willie said. He hesitated awkwardly, then said; "I couldn't just stay here, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, soldier," Pete said in a kind voice. "You see this is a combat outfit."

"I—I see," Willie said.

HE SMILED uncertainly at Pete, then followed Mac across the company street to the first barracks.

"How'd you happen to get here, anyway?" Mac said.

"Well, it was sort of a mistake," Willie explained. "They made a mistake on the orders in my outfit. But I got—well I got it before the orders could be changed."

"Well, don't worry about it," Mac said. "You'll get assigned to a training company. That's a snap up here. No hikes, no inspections, two or three day passes every week. Quite a deal."

Willie stole a sidelong glance at Mac's decorations. "These training outfits are made up of guys like me aren't they?"

"How'd you mean?"

"Well, guys who never were in combat."

"That's right."

Willie sighed and his heart felt heavy. He shot another look at Mac's ribbons. He wanted to know about how those had been earned; but he had enough sense not to ask.

Mac led him into a large barracks where a dozen men were sprawled about on comfortable cots. Mac put his hand on Willie's shoulder and said, "This here is a new arrival, men. He's just come over from that new army."

There was a good natured laugh from the men.

"But he's going to be with us for a while until he gets assigned to his regular outfit. His name is Willie Weston."

The men said hello and some of them came over and shook Willie's hand. He saw more Silver Stars; more DSC's; and two more Medals of Honor. Also some of the men wore shoulder loops from Belgium, Holland and France.

Mac took him then to a bunk at the end of the barracks. "You can use this today," he said. "Mine's right next to it. So if you want anything I'll be handy."

He looked Willie over carefully and then shook his head.

"One thing. We're having an inspection in about ten minutes. So you better get fixed up."

"Gosh," Willie said. He didn't need a shave, he knew; he never did. But he knew he wasn't in shape for an inspection. He looked down the barracks and saw that most of the men needed shaves and were wearing uniforms that were clean, but wrinkled and frayed. There were cigarette butts on the floor and magazines scattered around carelessly.

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"What should I do?" he asked Mac.

"First, better take off that tie," Mac said. "Then pull your trousers out of them boots and let 'em sort of hang around your ankles. You could muss your hair up a little but that ain't strictly necessary."

Willie stared hard at Mac to see if he was kidding; but Mac's long angular face was quite earnest.

"What kind of an inspection is it?" Willie said, flabbergasted.

"Regular Saturday morning inspection." He smiled then at Willie's expression. "But it's a little different, you see."

"I guess it is," Willie said weakly.

He took off his tie and pulled his neatly creased trousers free from the top of his boots. Then he unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirts and the buttons on his shirt pockets.

"That's a lot better," Mac said approvingly.

A few minutes later Pete, the lieutenant Willie had met in the orderly room, came into the barracks. He talked to a few men and then came down to Willie.

"I'll have you straightened out by tonight," he said. "Everything going okay?"

"Yes, everything's going fine," Willie said.

Pete chatted with him for a while and then left the barracks, after promising to get in touch as soon as anything definite developed on the orders.

"You can put your tie back on," Mac grinned. "That is if it makes you more comfortable."

"Was that the inspection?" Willie cried.

"Well, it's not really an inspection," Mac said. "We just like to clown around that way. Sort of remind us how lucky we are now. Some of the guys go for days without shaving just to look like hell for the Saturday morning inspection. Makes 'em feel real good, I guess."

Chow call sounded a little later. Mac took him to the mess hall which was unlike anything Willie had seen in the army. There was no standing in line, no waiting. They went into a comfortable room with small tables and sat down to eat. Music came from somewhere and the tunes were things like the Artillery Song and the Beer Barrel Polka.

After eating they went back to the barracks and stretched out on their cots. Mac lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

"This is really the nice time of day here," he said.

Through the windows Willie saw it was getting darker. From somewhere came the faint music of To The Colors; and a cannon boomed far away. Willie noticed that the men in the barracks were quiet now. They smoked cigarettes and listened to the retreat music with little smiles on their lips.

When the echoes of the cannon faded into the swiftly darkening night Mac grinned sideways at him. "This is how we stand retreat," he said. "It's just as respectful I guess as any other way and it seems more peaceful."

When it was dark the men strolled out to the back of the barracks.

Mac looked at Willie. "Want to go outside? It's nice out there now."

WILLIE went out with Mac into the moon-lighted area behind the barracks. Someone had built a small fire. Men squatted about the fire talking; an occasional cigarette flared in the darkness. Above the moon was peaceful in a black sky. Beyond was a fringe of trees silhouetted vaguely against the shadowy horizon. A soft cool wind was blowing and it was just

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enough to make the fire comfortable.

Mac sat down at the edge of the group and Willie squatted beside him. The men were talking now, their voices a quiet murmuring against the crackle of the fire.

Willie looked around at their faces highlighted in pale relief by the leaping flames. The faces were wistful; the conversation was running to battles that had been fought long ago. They were old soldiers now, squatting about an immemorial campfire, reliving campaigns that existed only in their memories.

The talk swung to Kasserine Pass. A man who had seen his regiment's colors captured by Germans told the story, half in bitterness, half in amusement. There was a quiet chuckle from a boyish looking soldier on his right. The young soldier wore decorations that many three star Generals would envy. He looked about nineteen.

He mentioned Anzio.

"We dug in, remember?" he said.

There was a general murmur of remembrance, that had in it a note of weary scorn.

"We took three days to dig in," the youngster said, smiling a little now. "Nobody knew Jerry was sitting up on the hills watching us, had every square foot of the beach zeroed in with eighty-eight's. When we got set nice and snug, with latrines dug, fox holes all set and supply troops coming in to look for souvenirs, then Jerry let go. Those gunners didn't have much of a job. All they had to do was pull the lanyards and re-load." He chuckled a little. "Some time."

There was a footnote to Salerno. Another to Omaha Beach, the code name for the Yank beach at Cherbourg.

"How about that Colonel?" somebody laughed. "He said, 'Don't stand around here on the beach and die. Go in a few miles—then die'."

Willie listened to their stories and he felt something stirring in him. He felt sad, but it was such a big sadness that it just didn't get absorbed. But it hung around him, coming from tired, mocking voices, from sudden grins, from the crackling fire and the moon above in the black sky.

He heard the story of the breakthrough at St. Lo. There was a commentary on Avranches; another on Paris—before Paris became a rest center. These stories weren't like the ones he'd read in the states. There was no glamor, no romance, no thrilling, pulse-quickening lift in these stories of war told in hard tired voices.

These weren't the stories the war correspondents wrote; or the people at home read.

GI Joe was a hero in those stories. He was a funny little guy who was fighting for hot dogs and baseball. He didn't mind the cold and the danger as long as there was a hot dog waiting for him when he got home. He was a hero who wasn't afraid of Nazi artillery.

"That rotten eighty-eight," somebody said with a bitter laugh. "I ran into a battery of them during the Bulge. I remember asking my platoon commander what we were supposed to be doing out on a road where we couldn't turn around while those eighty-eights picked us off. He said, 'Don't you want to be a hero?' I said, 'Hell no,' and he said, 'Neither do I and the reason we're here getting our heads shot off is that I can't think of anything better to do'."

"I remember," another voice said, "when our captain told us we were going to get von Rundstedt. He said we were trying to find him so we could offer him a raise and get him on our side."

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Mac said, unexpectedly, "Hell, it wasn't that bad and you guys know it."

"Maybe not," the boyish looking soldier said, grinning. "Anyway it doesn't look so bad now. I guess the thing to do is forget it. It's over and nobody knows what all the shouting was about."

"You're wrong there, soldier," a curiously mild voice beside Willie said. The voice was soft but it carried a ring in it that sent a little chill down Willie's spine. He looked at the speaker but he was squatting in the shadow; he could see only a long tired face and thinning gray hair.

"THE thing is not to forget it," the speaker said, and his voice was firm; and the men about the fire looked at him in silence. "It's over, it's true, and some people claim it was a waste. They claim we fought the wrong people, that it wasn't our business, anyway. When a man talks that way I wonder what theatre he served in during the war. Peculiarly enough, it generally develops that he hasn't served at all. The shouting you mention, soldier, started and got loud because somebody was getting pushed around. They didn't do the hollering. They weren't in a position to. We did the hollering because we're funny people that way. We just don't like to see people pushed around. So we went to war and because we like to do things right we did a helluva lot of pushing around ourselves. Now it's over. The thing to remember is that we did a necessary job and we did it damn well. And we're ready to do it again if we have to."

The man stopped talking then and there was silence. He smiled then, and said, "I didn't mean to monopolize your bull session."

Someone said, "That's all right," in a quiet voice.

The man stood up and the firelight flickered over his face and uniform. "I'm going to turn in," he said, smiling. "Good night, boys."

Willie looked at him, revealed in the firelight, and there was a lump in his throat as big as a billiard ball.

The man was tall and strong looking. There were four rows of ribbons above the left breast pocket of his Ike Jacket; and when he put on his burnished helmet Willie saw four silver stars gleaming across its front.

He nodded to the men and walked away into the night, and Willie saw the firelight flick across his polished boots and on the handles of pearl handled revolvers which hung at his waist.

"That's the boss," Mac said to Willie. "Pretty good guy."

"Why—that's—"

"Sure it is," Mac grinned. "He runs the whole show. He can still raise a little hell, too," he said, thoughtfully.

Willie felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Pete, the lieutenant from the orderly room. "I got you all set," he said. "Come on along."

Mac looked at him and said, "I'll come along with you, Willie."

They walked across the company street in silence. Willie's sadness was getting little enough now to feel. He didn't want to leave here. This wasn't what he thought the old soldiers were like; but it was what he wanted. He knew he had no right in this company and he tried to straighten his shoulders and swallow the lump in his throat.

Inside the orderly room a light was burning. Pete picked up a mimeographed order from his desk. "You're all set now. You report from here to the thirtieth basic training battalion."

Willie nodded and looked miserably

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at Mac. "T—thanks a lot for showing me around," he said.

Mac was leaning against the door. His long angular face was thoughtful. He pushed a strand of black hair from his eyes and said, "You like it here with us, don't you, kid?"

"Gosh, yes," Willie cried.

Mac looked at Pete. "Couldn't we do something about that? Seems like we need a recruit. What's an outfit without a recruit?"

Pete shook his head. "The orders are pretty definite Mac. There's just no way around it."

"Well," Mac said stubbornly, "couldn't we have an Inquiry or something? Maybe we could get the orders changed. The kid likes it here. I don't see why he can't stay."

"I'll do anything you want," Willie said desperately.

Pete said, "That's not the point. You're not a combat man. That's nothing against you, but this just isn't your place."

"How'd you get it?" Mac demanded of Willie.

"A grenade got me. It was at a lecture," Willie said.

"You see?" Pete said. "At a lecture. There might be some technicality we could use, but getting killed at a lecture is like being run over by a truck on the way to a draft board."

"Well, it was a grenade," Mac said, defensively. "That's how you got it yourself."

"Mine was mortar shrapnel," Pete said. "Anyway it happened at Salerno which makes a little difference."

WILLIE felt grateful to Mac; but he knew there was no chance. The sadness in him was deeper. "Don't worry about me," he said, and he tried to smile. "I know I don't belong here. I guess I wouldn't have been killed at all if I hadn't been day-dreaming during the lecture. The grenade just rolled over in front of me and was too surprised to do anything. I thought about grabbing the handle and throwing it away, but there wasn't time. I got excited and jumped on top of it. It was all my fault," he concluded honestly.

"You see?" Pete said again. "There's just no hope."

But Mac snapped his fingers. "Listen, kid, you say you were going to pick up the grenade by the handle. What the hell kind of a grenade was it?"

"I don't know," Willie said. "But it was like a tin can with a handle on it."

"A potato masher," Mac said.

"No, it was a real grenade. I know because it went off."

"A potato masher is what we called German grenades," Mac said patiently. He looked at Pete. "How about that? He got it from a German grenade. That's the way a lot of guys here got it. And he was trying to save his buddies. Hell, there's a good case."

Pete looked at Willie's orders again and frowned. "Maybe you got something. I'll have to send these back. Headquarters here is so snafued that it'll take months to get 'em straightened out again. Probably it'll turn out all right." He grinned suddenly at Willie. "We'll give it a whirl."

Mac grabbed Willie by the arm. "Well what do you say now?" he laughed.

Willie was too delirious to say anything. He just gulped and he felt the sadness leaving him. Finally he laughed and then Mac slapped him on the shoulder and dragged him out of the orderly room.

They walked back toward the group at the campfire. Ahead the moon was

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rising against a black sky; the wind was sharper now and the fire looked warm and inviting.

From somewhere a long way off a clear bugle sounded Taps mournfully. It was always a sad thing for Willie to hear, but now as he walked beside Mac to the soldiers at the fire he felt different about it. It didn't sound sad at all.

THE END

COMETS AND METEORS

★ By FRANCES YERXA ★

FROM the beginning of time superstitious people have always regarded comets as preludes to disaster. In 1910, many Chinese people shot off fireworks in hopes of driving Haley's comet away. In the United States many people believed that the comet of 1812 foretold the war, and that Doneti's comet in 1858 brought on the Civil War. The ancients didn't understand the nature of a comet at all. Aristotle thought of them as some sort of exhalations coming out of the earth and becoming inflamed as they reached the upper atmosphere. Some early astronomers thought comets were living creatures possessed of wills and purpose, swimming about in outer space like a fish in the ocean. Some described comets as being blood-red, and taking the form of a hand with a flaming sword.

Before the invention of the telescope, only the very largest comets could be seen. Only about 400 comets were recorded before 1600. Since then the number of comets has increased since the telescopes have become more powerful. About 600 comets have been recorded since 1600. There are about five a year now except in 1925 there were eleven.

When a comet is first picked up with a telescope, it is only a star-like spot of light with a fuzzy appearance. As it comes closer, a tail begins to develop. The tail increases in length as the comet approaches the sun. The tail always points away from the sun, so that when the comet goes back, the tail streams out in front of it.

THE head of the comet is made up of two parts. A small bright center called the "nucleus," and around this, a hazy mass called the "coma." The diameter of the coma will range anywhere from 30,000 to 1,000,000 miles, while the nucleus is seldom more than 500 miles in diameter. The tail may be from 1,000,000 to 100,000,000 miles in length. But while the amount of space covered by the comet is great, the amount of matter making up the comet is relatively small. Astronomers are sure that the nucleus of the comet is a mixture of dust particles and gases, perhaps containing some pebbles and rocks. The coma is composed of a thin gaseous material and dust particles so fine that stars can be seen shining through it. The tail consists of a gaseous material driven out of the head of the comet by the rays of the sun. The light of a comet is believed to be reflected sunlight and some sort of phosphorescence, due to the influence of sunlight. It was once thought that comets entered our solar system from outer stellar space, but now it is believed that they belong to our system. They may be composed of matter erupted from the sun or from the major planets soon after the solar system came into existence, or they might be bits of matter picked up by our system 10,000,000 years ago. Our solar system contains about 1,000,000 comets. Most comets move in such large orbits that they come into our view about once in a thousand years. But the ones that move in smaller orbits are seen quite frequently. The most famous of these is Halley's comet. This brilliant comet appeared in 1682. Halley calculated that the bright comets of the past coincided with the orbits of the comet of 1682 and also the ones of 1531 and 1607. From that he concluded that they were the same comet returning approximately every 75 years. He predicted its return for 1758, but died before his prediction proved true. It has since returned in 1835 and 1910 and is due again in 1985.

"Shooting stars," as we call them, are not really stars at all but small bits of matter. Most are no larger than a grain of sand, but some weigh tons. They have been called cosmic rubbish. They may be material that was left over when planets were created. If the idea that the planets were formed from material pulled out of the sun is correct, then this material was probably pulled out of the sun at the same time. These bits of material are not visible until its path crosses that of the earth. As it enters the earth's atmosphere, the friction causes it to melt and it vaporizes and disappears. "Shooting stars" are known to astronomers as meteors.

OCCASIONALLY a large meteor comes into the earth's atmosphere and a piece of it falls to the earth. This piece is called a meteorite. Meteorites are important because they are the only tangible connection with outer space. It can be

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handled and put through a chemical analysis. Sometimes just one piece falls and again there will be a number of fragments. In 1869 about 100,000 meteorites fell at Pultusk. Most of them were very small. The largest meteorite was found in Greenland by Admiral Peary. It weighed 36 tons. Some meteorites are composed of crystalline rock, and some are made up mostly of iron and then some are a mixture of iron and dark heavy rock. In the Arizona desert there is a crater about 4,000 feet in dameter. The walls of the crater rise 150 feet above the desert and it sinks several hundred feet below the level of the desert. Thousands of meteors have been found near this crater and within the walls. Astronomers think that it is the result of a group of meteorites or perhaps just one enormous one which struck the earth a thousand years ago. The largest known meteoric fall was the Siberian fall in 1908. It was in northern Siberia where news travels slowly, and it wasn't until 1914 that the information found its way into the Russian cities and aroused some interest. Then the World War began and no one had time for such rumors. But in 1927 the Soviet sent an expedition to investigate. The findings were terrifying. They found that a group of meteorites had struck the ground making over 200 depressions. Some were 75 feet in diameter. The ground for fifteen miles around was charred as though it had been worked on with an enormous blow torch. And for 35 miles around the trees were uprooted and their limbs were all pointing away from the central area. This was probably caused by the terrific force of air as it rushed out from the center of impact. The meteorites were estimated at 40,000 tons. If one of these meteorites were to drop on one of our large cities, it would, without a doubt, destroy every single inhabitant.

* * *

HISTORY OF THE VAMPIRE USTRELS

★ By JON BARRY ★

AN USTREL is a Christian child that is born on Saturday and dies before he can be baptized. On the ninth day after burial he digs his way out of the grave and attacks the cattle, sucking their blood all night and returning to the grave at daybreak to rest from his night's labors. The Bulgarians have claimed that their herds have suffered much from raids of these Ustrels. After about ten nights of these blood-sucking attacks, he becomes so well fortified his body can stand longer journeys, and he joins huge herds of cattle and sheep and no longer returns to the grave for rest. During the day he rides between the horns of a cow or ram. The ustrel starts with the fattest cow of the herd and works his way down, perhaps sucking the blood from at least five cows a night. It is very important for the peasants to protect their herds against the ravages of these vampires. This is the method used: On Saturday morning the village drummer gives the signal to put out all the fires in the village. Then all the animals are driven out into the open. The men of the village march in front of the herds. They go into the woods and gather wood to make two bon-fires, one on each side of a road that they know is frequented by wolves. The herds are driven between these two fires. The vampire is supposed to become frightened and fall off by the fires. No one goes near these blackened remains for several days for the ustrel might get up and follow them back to the village. If he is left alone for several days, a wolf is sure to come along and eat him, and the herdsmen can see the ground soaked with his slimy blood.

FORECAST OF TOMORROW'S BREAKFAST

★ By J. R. MARKS ★

TOMORROW'S breakfast can be prepared in a jiffy without once bothering to open the refrigerator, and here's just a sample menu, to give you an idea of what you'll be getting up to eat not too far from now:

Supposing you like oranges—well, there are two and a half cases of oranges concentrated in that gallon jar on the shelf. Just water added from the tap will give you the amount of liquid you want, and your oranges will be kept as fresh and full of vitamins as if they were just recently purchased from the corner grocer. They'll keep for weeks. And with no refrigeration.

The toast is baked inside out with electric currents, and bacon strips are protected by plastic wrappings which keep in the flavor and prevent spoilage. If you want the eggs to go with that bacon, just dip a spoon into a can of yellow powder, mix with water and milk, and there's the scrambled eggs.

A cake the size of a candy bar, when mixed with hot or cold water, will give you your breakfast cereal, without adding any sugar or cream—they're included already.

If you like tea for breakfast, just add a lozenge to a cup of hot water, and the coffee you'll be drinking will probably be wheat or barley or rye, instead of coffee, as the furfuryl mercaptan which scientists find is what gives coffee its flavor, will be added into the cereal you use for coffee.

Many of these dehydrated products are already on sale, and the rest are just around the corner of the market. In fact, tomorrow's breakfast might very well be had today!

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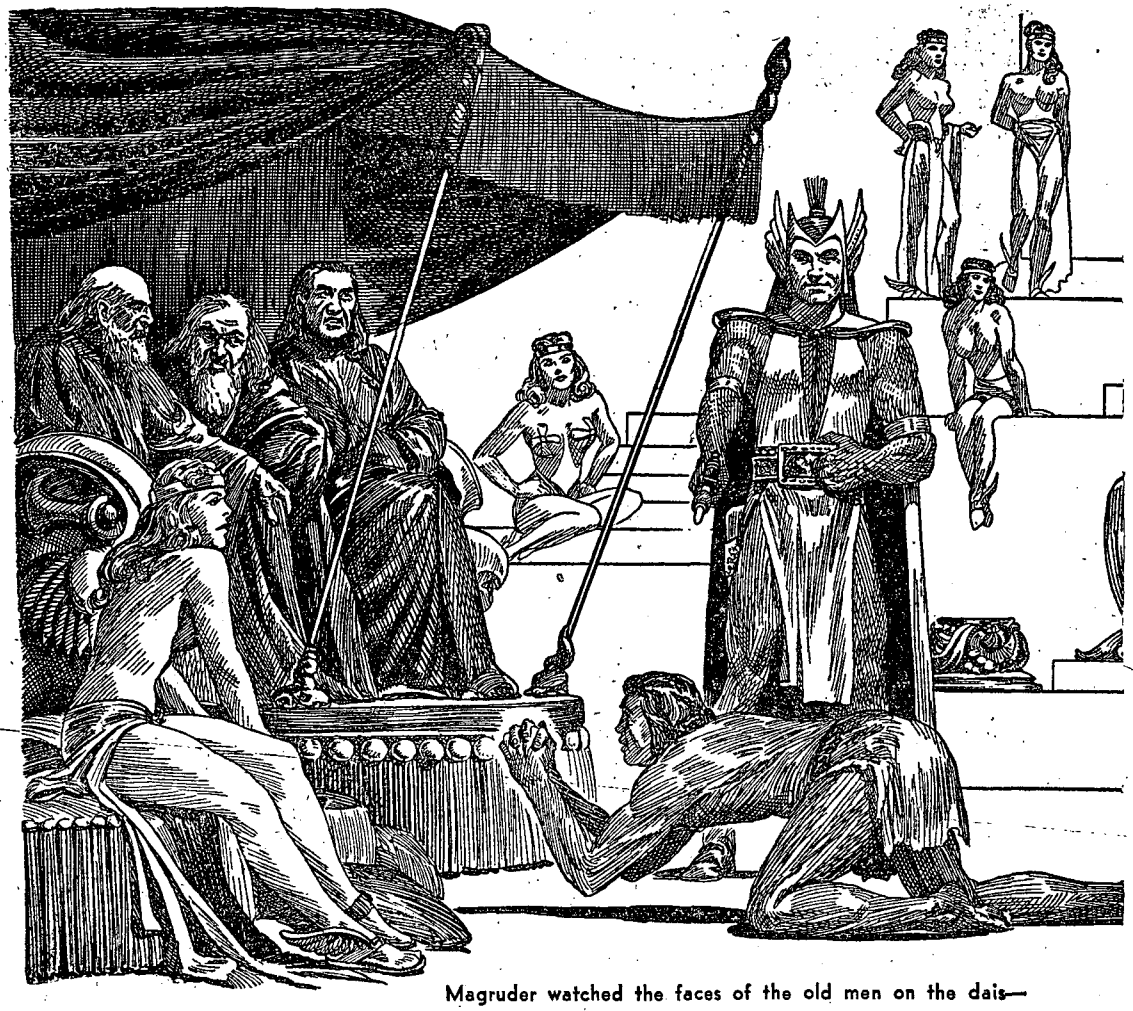

Magruder watched the faces of the old men on the dais—

The Drums of Murd

by H. B. HICKEY

"DR. ROGERS," his secretary said, "there is a call for you—"

She hesitated, and Mr. Rogers nervously rubbed the bald spot on his head as she left the sentence hanging in mid-air. He had an idea who the call was from and it gave him a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"It's Mrs. Brooks in the Rosmond Towers," the girl finished.

The Rosmond Towers was one of the great apartment buildings that thrust itself into the sky along Chicago's lake front. It had been managed by the firm of Rogers and Stone for some years,

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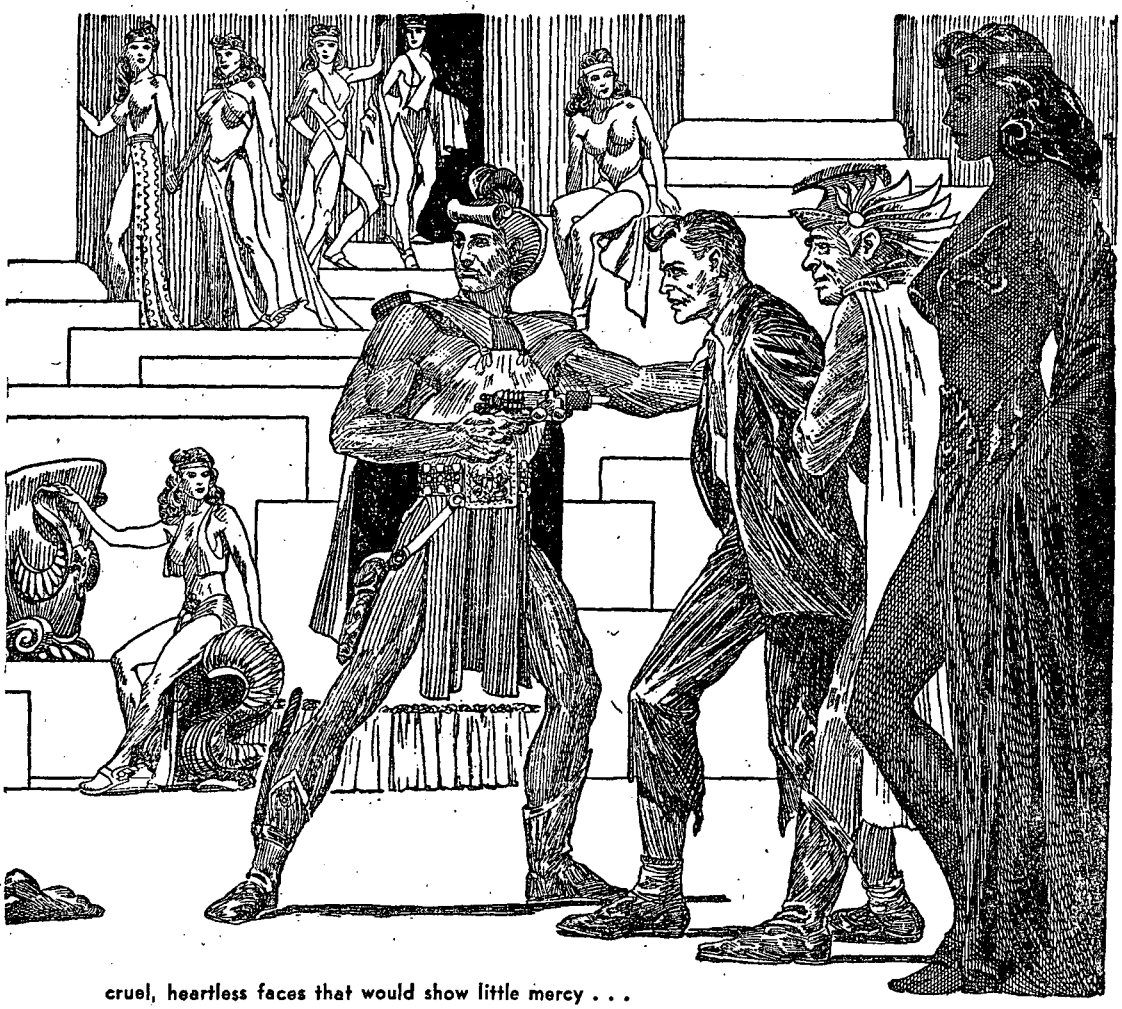

cruel, heartless faces that would show little mercy . . .

Lane Magruder heard the drums beat their slow, pulsating rhythm — and then suddenly the world grew dark around him

at first with pleasure and lately with the feelings entertained by a father whose wife has just presented him with a two-headed baby.

"Put her on," Mr. Rogers said glumly.

It was a one way conversation. His end of it consisted merely of the use of the three letter affirmative. Once he said, "It did?" and his secretary looked at him in surprise. His glance at her said plaintively, how could you do this to me? She knew as well as he what Mrs. Brooks had to say to him.

"Yes, Mrs. Brooks. We'll look into it again," he closed wearily.

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He set the phone back on its cradle and stared at it balefully. Lately it had got so that when it rang he had an impulse to run and hide in the men's room. Enough was enough. There was going to be an end to this Rosmond Towers affair.

"STONE!"

A dozen stenographers lost a year of their lives each as Mr. Rogers' bellow resounded through the room. Mr. Bolton gulped and reached for a chalk tablet. These sudden shocks were definitely bad for his ulcers. And Mr. Stone shot from his desk at the other end of the big room and ran as though Rogers had lit a fire under him. He came up puffing.

"Good grief, Rogers. You can't do things like that. You've thrown the office into a panic."

"Fine," Rogers told his junior partner. "Now they'll know how I feel about calls from that building."

"Oh, come now. There's no reason—"

"There isn't? Then why are the calls always shunted to me? Why don't you take them?"

"Why, it just happens—"

"It just happens you've let the girl at the switchboard understand that the Rosmond Towers is *my* headache! Well, let me tell you a few things—"

He told him. The entire office staff settled back to listen with quiet satisfaction. About time. Stone, with his tailored elegance and condescending manner, was no favorite. He had inherited the partnership from his father, but he had inherited no desire for work.

"And finally, but not least," Mr. Rogers concluded, "you were supposed to rent that penthouse apartment. Why haven't you done it?"

"If there's one thing I *have* tried to do, it's that," Stone said in an offended tone. "But every time the building superintendent is showing the penthouse to a prospective tenant Mrs. Brooks herself comes up to queer things."

"I could throttle that woman," Rogers muttered.

"Still, it must be terrible on the woman's nerves to live directly below that awful thing."

"It's ruining mine and I don't live there," Rogers admitted. "But that doesn't let you out. What are you doing about it?"

"Today," Stone told him grimly, "I have advertised that penthouse at a rental which is so low we'll be losing a fortune on it."

Behind them a voice said, "That's the only way I could afford it."

SHE was tall for a girl, with long, naturally wavy ash-blonde hair and a complexion that did not come from a make-up kit. Her neatly tailored suit did nothing to accentuate her figure, but neither did it detract. She had a sweetly firm chin and a pair of cool gray eyes that did things to Mr. Stone.

That gentleman opened his mouth and produced a gulp. The situation was left for his senior partner to save. Mr. Rogers rose with a courtly bow.

"I am Mr. Rogers. May we be of any assistance?"

"I'm Carol Dorne." The girl extended a hand which Mr. Rogers was tempted, out of gratitude and sudden chivalry, to kiss.

"I'm interested in the apartment which you and this gentleman were discussing. At least I think that's the one."

She produced a clipping from the want-ad section of the morning paper and laid it on the desk. Mr. Stone took one look at the clipping and nodded.

"That's it all right."

"Fine! If you can draw up a lease

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right now I'll sign it while I'm here."

Stone's face lit up and he was off like a shot. Mr. Rogers called him back.

"Just a minute. It's only fair to warn Miss Dorne."

Her smile made Rogers wish he were thirty years younger.

"That really is sweet of you. But I'm not a child. I realize that such a ridiculously low rental means something is wrong with the apartment."

"Oh, it's quite beautiful," Stone protested.

"Shut up," Rogers snapped. He turned to the girl.

"Are you a sound sleeper, Miss Dorne?"

"I sleep like a log."

Her eyes were suddenly wide, like a child who has been told there is no Santa Claus, and then finds her fondest dream wrapped up in red ribbon under the Christmas tree.

"You mean it's haunted? Oh, that would be *too* wonderful!"

"Oh, would it?" Mr. Rogers grunted. "I take it you don't believe in ghosts."

"I'm not sure. But I'm not afraid of them."

"Good. Nevertheless we'll insert a clause in the lease which will allow you to vacate without giving us notice."

"You're more than kind, but I don't think that will be necessary. All my life I've dreamed of the time when I could come to the big city and live in a penthouse. I won't be frightened away very easily."

Within ten minutes a regular lease had been drawn up. Carol Dorne signed her name in clear feminine handwriting, handed over two month's rent, and the apartment was hers.

"And now, if you'd like," Mr. Rogers said, "we'll drive you over and show you the place."

"I'm sorry but I don't have the time. I've got to rush to morning rehearsal. If you can give me the keys, or see that they're sent to the theater, I'll have my things moved in this afternoon. And I can move in this evening, right after the performance."

"You're an actress!" Mr. Stone breathed. He had come to life again.

"Uhuh. The ingenue in 'Tantrum', at the Gelwyn."

She bent and scribbled something on a card which she had taken from her purse. They could see her sign her name at the end. With a smile she handed the card to Mr. Rogers.

"I'd like you to be my guest at tonight's performance."

His blush went clear up to the roots of his white hair.

"I should be delighted. And I would like my wife to see you act."

"I knew you would. The pass is for two."

MR. ROGERS was still beaming when he and his wife were ushered to a pair of the best seats in the house. Then the curtain went up and he settled back to watch the performance.

The play had little to commend it in the way of good writing. But the acting was superb. And the girl's performance brought a glow of almost paternal pride to Mr. Roger's face. She was no polished actress, but what she lacked in finish she more than made up with the honesty of her presentation. Her personality was projected clearly across the footlights. And the audience loved her.

"Isn't she wonderful?" Mr. Rogers nudged his wife. "I wish we had a daughter like that."

"You're an old romantic, Sam," the white haired lady at his side smiled. "And a dear. Do you think we could go backstage to meet her?"

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"I'm sure we could. And I hope those roses I sent came in time."

"You *are* a dear. Now come along."

They made their way through the crowd that eddied behind the stage and through the wings to the dressing rooms. Ouside Carol Dorne's door bouquets were banked against the wall, and when they were admitted to the room they saw that those outside had been only the overflow. But on her dressing table there was a single vase of long stemmed roses.

Mr. Rogers was touched. He saw that there were tears in the girl's eyes when he presented her to his wife. And he felt quietly happy when he saw that his wife took the girl to her heart.

"I guess I'll always be small town," Carol told them. "The orchids and the camellias are exciting. And so are all the men who send them and who want to take me out. But today was the first time I really felt at home here."

"It's because of you, Mr. Rogers. First you were so concerned about me taking the penthouse, even though you wanted to rent it. And now the roses."

"It's nothing, really, Miss Dorne. I—" He was embarrassed, and happy when a change of subject came quickly to mind.

"Oh, about the penthouse. I'm still concerned about you living there. We were so flustered about renting it that we didn't explain quite fully."

"I don't want you to explain. I'm really not afraid—of whatever it is you're worried about."

"Oh, it hasn't harmed anyone. I admit that. But this afternoon a fellow came in to see about renting it. He was upset when I told him someone had taken it. And he was quite insistent. Offered fabulous sums if you'd sub-let it to him."

"Not interested," Carol Dorne told him. "I don't care how much he offered."

"That's how I thought you'd feel. I told him so, but he said he'd call again tomorrow anyway in case you changed your mind. I was glad to get rid of him. Odd sort of chap. All bundled up despite the heat and he kept his hat pulled low over his eyes. Might have been a gangster."

"Now you are trying to frighten Miss Dorne," his wife accused.

"I guess so. Don't suppose he was a gangster. But he did give me an odd feeling, I will say that."

Carol Dorne was staring at him. There was an apprehensive feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something was wrong and she didn't know what it was. On the other hand it hadn't harmed anyone, as Mr. Rogers had said; and he wouldn't have let her take it if there were any real danger.

"Just what does go on there?" she asked.

"Noises."

"You mean clanking chains and that sort of thing?"

"A sort of drumming. Very disturbing. We've had it looked into but we can't locate the cause. In the structure, probably."

"What happened to the last tenant?"

"They moved to New York. The drumming started before we could rent it again. It isn't constant. At night mostly, and not even every night."

"Well, I can always stuff cotton in my ears."

"Nevertheless I wish I hadn't rented it to you. I—" He sat down and stared blankly at the wall. He didn't know himself why he was so concerned. But he was.

"How would it be if Mrs. Rogers stayed with you the first night?" he asked hopefully.

"I'd be glad to do it," his wife said.

"Of course not. It's very kind of you

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to offer but I couldn't let you. And I promise I'll be all right. In fact I'll call you first thing in the morning. How's that?"

"It will have to do, I suppose," Mr. Rogers said glumly.

"Oh, we're just a couple of old fools," his wife told him. "Worrying the poor child. We'd better be going, Sam. It's past our bedtime."

SHE RUBBED her cheek where Mrs. Rogers had kissed her affectionately. They were nice old people. And they hadn't meant to worry her by being overly solicitous. After all, there must be a thousand other people who were living at the Rosmond Towers. Suddenly the uncertainty was gone and she was eager to see the penthouse she had rented.

Dressing quickly, Carol dabbed some powder on her nose, slung her purse over her shoulder, and was ready to go. Outside the theater the doorman whistled for a cab, held the door open for her.

"Where to, lady?" the driver asked.

"The Rosmond Towers."

She settled back, caught him giving her an appreciative once-over in the rear view mirror. That helped, too, it was such an every-day occurrence. Turning off Randolph Street and into Michigan Boulevard the cab driver waved to a big, blue-shirted policeman. The policeman waved back. Things were normal again.

But at the Rosmond Towers the doorman bowed as he held open the big door, and looking over his shoulder Carol felt the uneasiness return.

A man had come around the corner and the wind on the Drive had blown his hat upward so that he had to grab for it. For an instant his forehead was exposed. And Carol Dorne had the queerest feeling that there was a hole in his forehead, and that she could see all the way through.

"YOU'RE Miss Dorne?"

She whirled. It was only the elevator man, friendly, smiling, with a bridge of freckles across his nose.

"Yes. Yes, I am.

She was breathless. Her heart was pounding strangely as she looked back at the door. The man was going past without even looking in.

"Mr. Rogers called," the elevator man was saying. "He told me to watch for you. Said I should go up with you and see that everything was all right."

"How kind."

"Sure. He's really nice, that Mr. Rogers. He's always—"

His voice went on, friendly, steadying. That was better. Just a nice, everyday voice. Preoccupation with unnatural things could make anyone nervous, she thought. A man with a hole all the way through his forehead! How could she even have imagined such a thing?

She was laughing at herself when she gave the elevator man the keys so he could open the door for her. He found the light switch at once and the apartment was flooded with light.

It was more beautiful than she had dared hope. Richly furnished, every room was different. And there were only four of them. Easy to take care of.

The elevator man went ahead of her, searching every nook and cranny. He dug into the closets, peered under the bed, and she felt foolish.

"That isn't necessary," she smiled.

"Mr. Rogers said I should do it," he told her.

He opened the big glass doors that faced the lake and went out on the terrace and prowled about. But there was nothing a man could have hidden behind. He was shaking his head when

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he came in.

"All clear."

He hesitated, grinned at her.

"If that Mrs. Brooks comes up to bother you don't pay any attention to her. I think she's got drums in her head. You know—" His finger described a circle at his temple.

He handed back the keys and Carol watched him go. Then she shot the bolt behind him and turned to look at her penthouse again. She felt like a queen in the midst of that luxury. It was just perfect, just what she'd dreamed of.

But it was a bit warm and even a little musty. Probably hadn't been occupied in months. She went to the windows on the south and threw them open, then crossed the room and swung wide the doors to the terrace. Lake Michigan stretched out far below and the breeze that swept over it was cool.

Suddenly the premonition was with her again. It clutched at her heart, and the wind was no longer cool, but chill. What seemed so strange about that breeze, she wondered. It blew not steadily, but in measured gusts. No, that wasn't the wind. It was the room which throbbed!

The drums began to beat.

CHAPTER II

LANE MAGRUDER settled himself back in his chair, lifted his feet and made a space for them on the littered laboratory desk by kicking aside that morning's paper. He'd already gone through that from the front page headlines to the last want-ad.

Except for the scientific apparatus which was scattered everywhere about the room, the lanky six-footer was surrounded by reading material. And he seemed to read everything. A. N. Whitehead's latest book on the philosophical implications of the new mechanics leaned against Warren Brown's story of the Chicago Cubs. Korzybski's tome on General Semantics sprawled open atop a copy of Mezzrow's "Really the Blues."

At the moment Magruder was immersed in Schrodinger's account of the physicial structure of the genes. Ten minutes later he would be reading Dirac. Magruder groaned. With so much reading to do he'd never get down to writing his own book.

The phone rang several times before he lifted it from the hook. Who could be calling him at seven-thirty in the morning? It was the police commissioner.

"Magruder? Something here I want you to handle." That was Stearns all right. Straight to the point.

"Field's basement," Magruder said.

"Cut out the horseplay. I know it's you. And this is right down your alley."

"The word is appropriate. I seem to be your clean-up man."

"I'm dead serious, Magruder." And so he was. And a little frightened too, Magruder realized from the tone of his voice. But Stearns was still talking.

"This is not something my own men have botched. It's sheerly beyond them."

"All right," Magruder grunted. "See you at your office."

"No. Go straight to the Rosmond Towers. Delaney's there and he knows you. I've already told him to back you up in anything you do."

There was more but Magruder had already hung up. If Delaney himself was on the job it meant something big. Magruder threw on a fresh shirt and was off. Luckily his short hair did not have to be combed.

He kicked the Plymouth coupe into life and spurted from the curb in front

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of his apartment building. Although he'd never been inside the Rosmond Towers he knew where it was. The coupe hurtled down the Outer Drive.

Captain Delaney was waiting for him in the penthouse, a big iron-gray Irishman with a lot of ability and a sense of humor. At the moment he was not smiling.

"Stearns told me he called you. I sure hope the answer to this thing's in one of your books, Lane."

A couple of helpless looking detectives grunted disdainfully and the uniformed policeman at the broken door shook his head. There were a half dozen other people in the room. All of them looked bewildered.

"We'll see, captain," Magruder smiled.

His keen dark eyes swept the room, probed the people there. "I see you've given the place a thorough going over."

"We've been working since one o'clock this morning," Delaney told him. "And we've got nowhere. I'm beginning to think everybody's dreaming and the whole thing never happened at all."

"Maybe you've been working too hard. That can throw you off sometimes. How about giving me the dope?"

"For you it'll be simple," one of the detectives cut in sarcastically. Delaney let him finish. "About midnight a girl entered this apartment. Five minutes later she'd disappeared. That's all."

"You've got it narrowed down to five minutes?" Magruder asked.

Delaney nodded and called over a a tired looking young man with red hair and a bridge of freckles across his nose. The young fellow still wore his uniform.

"Tell your story to Mr. Magruder," Delaney said kindly. The elevator man wet his lips.

"Well, sir, there isn't much to tell. I took Miss Dorne up here only a minute or two after twelve. I left her in the apartment with the door locked. On the way down I noticed one of her gloves on the floor of the elevator so I came up again. The door was still locked but she didn't answer. So I called the night super and we broke down the door. She was gone."

"You're sure of the length of time you were gone?"

"How long could it take me?" the man said helplessly.

"All right, I'm not doubting you." Magruder turned. "Let's see that door."

He noted that the door had given way at the hinges, that it had been bolted from the inside. Carefully he set it back in place. It fitted so tightly that it could not conceivably have been opened from outside.

"Any other doors?" he asked Delaney.

"No."

MAGRUDER shook his head. This was getting interesting. But if the girl had not gone out the door then there must be some other way. He crossed the room and stuck his head out of the window. There was a sheer drop of thirty floors to the street. This side of the apartment was flush with the wall of the building.

He went to the other side and opened the terrace door. The sour faced detective was grinning scornfully, Magruder noticed. They always hate to admit that someone else might be smarter, he thought.

The terrace ran to the other edge of the building roof and ended in a low wall. There were a couple of deck chairs and a table, some potted plants. Nothing else.

"Now I'll give you the rest of it,"

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Delaney said when Magruder came back into the living room. "Those terrace doors were open and so was that window."

"Maybe she jumped," Magruder said hopefully. He was beginning not to like this.

"Without leaving a trace on the ground?" Delaney snorted. "You know better than that, Lane. Beside, we were here within ten minutes and it was the first thing we checked."

"The walls? The floors?" Magruder probed.

"Solid. We've tapped every inch, and used needles besides."

"Could she have let herself down with a rope?"

"Listen, Lane!" Delaney was red in the face. "I know my business. Anything she could have attached a rope or chain to has been microscopically examined. And she hadn't the time. Even at that we closed all the exits and checked every apartment in the building."

He picked up a professional photograph from a table and handed it to Magruder.

"This is what she looked like, in case you're interested."

Magruder studied the picture, pursed his lips in appreciation. Carol Dorne looked like the kind of girl he'd always wanted to know but had never been lucky enough to meet.

"Worth finding," he grinned.

"And don't think we're not trying," Delaney grunted. "We're combing the city."

"All right then," Magruder nodded. "She vanished into thin air. But there must be a clue somewhere."

"Yeah. One. And it isn't much."

He led Magruder to the long couch were the elevator man sat with the other five. Magruder's keen eyes sized up immediately the white haired gentleman and the woman next to him as Carol Dorne's parents. The woman was crying.

There was a doorman, a thin, nervous woman, and a husky man who was plainly the building superintendent. The superintendent started to speak without being asked. He did it mechanically, something he'd gone through many times that night.

"When we got to the door there was a drumming sound inside. It disappeared by the time we got in."

"Evil, that's what it is," the nervous woman blurted. "I always knew it and I warned Mr. Rogers."

"This is Mrs. Brooks," Delaney explained. "She lives downstairs."

"For months," she continued without a break, "it's been going on."

"OH, I'D better tell it," the white haired man said wearily. He liked the looks of this young fellow. Well-set-up sort of chap, and intelligent looking.

"I'm Rogers. My firm manages this building. A couple of months ago Mrs. Brooks began to complain of a drumming sound that seemed to emanate from this penthouse. We looked into it, had our engineers and architects go over the place."

"And you found what?" Magruder asked.

"Nothing, sir. Nothing."

Mrs. Rogers was crying bitterly. "I just know something dreadful has happened to that sweet girl." Her husband put his arms around her shoulders.

"As far as the architect could figure out it was caused by the normal building sway in a wind."

"Plausible," Magruder admitted.

"The engineer thought it could be caused by the heating system."

"Also plausible," Magruder nodded.

"Bosh!" Mrs. Brooks snorted. "I

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heard the noise when there was no wind at all, and I also heard it at times when the heat was shut off."

"So there goes that," Magruder smiled. He studied her. "Any special kind of drumming, was it?"

"No," she said hesitantly. "Just like a deep drum. Usually it came through the ceiling of my place. Sometimes it almost seemed to be my own apartment. It would start slow and end in a sort of frenzy."

"Sort of a ghostly Gene Krupa," Magruder grinned. Mrs. Brooks burst into tears.

"I'm frightened. I'm terribly frightened."

"Please don't be. We'll have the building guarded night and day until this is cleared up."

He looked at Delaney and the captain nodded affirmation. Mrs. Brooks stopped crying. But she still looked scared.

So am I, a little, Magruder admitted to himself. Delaney was too thorough a man to be doubted. The girl had been locked in this apartment all by herself. And she had vanished into thin air.

The hair on the back of Magruder's neck rose, and there was a chill down the length of his spine. Science didn't know everything, he was thinking. Maybe—? But maybe not.

"Is there anything you can think of," he asked the group in general, "which might have some bearing on this? Even if it seems remote."

"Yes," Rogers told him. "Miss Dorne rented the apartment only yesterday—"

"Wait." Magruder snapped his fingers. "I remember the advertisement. It was priced at about a fifth of its value. You must have been flooded with applicants."

"We were. But she was the first so she got it. However, one of the later ones was very insistent. Fellow with a pasty complexion and his hat over his eyes. Offered any price if we'd get her to give it up. Said he'd call back today."

"Good. Delaney, have the wires tapped in case he does."

"I already arranged for that," Delaney grunted. The sour faced detective was sneering but Magruder paid no attention to him.

"Anything else?"

"Yes." It was the doorman. "About one minute before she disappeared a fellow peeked in the door downstairs. He beat it when he saw me. But the light fell on his face. He—he—"

"He what?" Magruder asked. The doorman was befuddled.

"I know it sounds crazy, sir. But it looked to me like he had a hole in his forehead, right above his eyes. And for just a second I thought I was looking straight through it!"

"You got a hole in your head," the mean detective said.

"Let Magruder handle this," Delaney told him.

Lane Magruder was shaking his head. The doorman was not crazy, that was evident. Maybe it had been an illusion. Maybe not. This case was queer enough. It could not be approached from a realistic angle. Illusion or not, even five minutes wouldn't have been long enough for the strange man to climb thirty-seven floors. Unless he had wings. He said as much and seriously.

"Are *you* crazy?" Delaney wanted to know. The detectives were laughing.

"Not at all." Magruder was calm. He went on with cold logic.

"Let's face it, Delaney. We've established that the girl was here, locked in. You yourself have proved she did

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not leave at all. She could not have left through any human agency. But she's gone. Have you a rational explanation? And what about those drums?"

Even the detectives looked frightened. Delaney was biting his lip, his eyes suddenly wary. Delaney had faced gunmen without flinching. But gunmen were real, their bullets solid. They could be fought with guns, with cleverness.

This is what Delaney's afraid of, Magruder thought. It's one of those things, like dogs that bark in the night when someone has died. Or like two people who are a thousand miles apart thinking the same thought at the same time. You call it coincidence, or deny it altogether. But you know it's true.

THE ROOM was suddenly chilly, everyone in it apprehensive. Delaney rubbed the back of his neck nervously, his face gone white. The detectives looked over their shoulders. Mr. Rogers wiped his face with a handkerchief.

"You people better leave," Delaney said kindly. "We'll let you know if we want you again."

When they had gone he stared wanly at Magruder. "Well?"

"Something got her," Magruder said. "Something that can go through walls and locked doors, or that flies like a bird. Something that leaves no trace."

"Something that beats like a drum," Delaney whispered. "Or that maybe goes around with a hole through its head."

He was actually shaking now.

"Lane, you've got to clear it up. If you don't—and it keeps on— Let's go outside. I don't want to talk in here."

"This isn't in any of my books," Magruder told him when they were out in the hall.

He saw that Delaney had unbuttoned his collar and was fingering something inside his shirt. It hung on a thin chain.

"Yeah. Maybe we'd better pray," Magruder said. And he meant it.

"Listen, Delaney," he went on, "I don't know any more than you do. We're in the same boat. It's something that can't be explained, only felt. And we feel it with that part of us that remembers when the world was young and weird things walked."

"I'm not yellow, Magruder," Delaney whispered. "But so help me I'm afraid."

"I don't think there's anything immediate to fear, captain. Whatever it is seems to be associated with the drumming. And that comes only at night."

"I'd rather face tigers barehanded than be here at night," Delaney said.

"That's fine. Because I want to handle this alone. I think one man can do more than a thousand in this case. You can station all the cops you want around Mrs. Brooks. But tell them to stay away from here unless I call for help. I've got a hunch I'll hear that drumming tonight."

"If that's the way you want it," Delaney agreed. "But you're a braver man than I am."

"Not braver," Lane Magruder was smiling now, a boyish smile that lit up his dark features.

"Not braver. Just more curious, Delaney. I've always had a thirst for the unknown."

HE WAS tense with the waiting in the lonely apartment in the night. The lights were on; that was something to be thankful for. Delaney had said they'd been on last night.

Down below the lake sparkled in bright moonlight and from one edge

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of the terrace Magruder could see the lights of Randolph Street and the Loop. But those things were far away. Carol Dorne had seen them, too, before she'd vanished. But she had been alone up here.

As he was alone.

He whirled. A sound! Surely that *was* a noise he'd heard. His feet made a soft thudding in the thick carpet as he ran for the door. It swung open on its new hinges and he was in the hall.

The hall was empty.

Nerves, that was all. Just nerves. Magruder went back into the big living room and shot the bolt behind him. Nothing could get through that locked door. But it had, hadn't it? It had got Carol Dorne.

There was that noise again! And it was in the hall outside the door. This time he went on tiptoe, slid the bolt back without the faintest scratch. Flung open the door!

And the hall was empty.

His breathing was thick and labored. The scientific mind, he thought grimly, when it's faced with something that can't be expressed in an equation. It goes to pieces like any other mind.

No, that wasn't so. It doesn't go to pieces. It faces the unknown bravely and seeks to know it. The thought steadied him. What he had heard he had heard. Not in his mind but with his ears.

From the hall. Magruder could not doubt it, would not let himself doubt it. This time he was certain. But from where? The hall was empty. It was small. The elevator doors were closed, the cage down below somewhere. But beyond the shaft was a dark niche, tiny but big enough.

"Come out of there," Magruder said.

His voice was high and shrill in his own ears.

"All right. I am coming."

OUT OF the darkness it came. It? It was a man, Magruder saw. A man like any other man. But Magruder was lying to himself and he knew it. For the skin was a dull white. And the hat was not pulled low enough. He could see the hole in the forehead.

The hole went all the way through.

"No. Stay where you are," Magruder whispered frantically.

He was sweating. A cold sweat that plastered his shirt to his back. Pull yourself together, Magruder, his mind said. Fortunately for him the thing stopped. He had a chance to think.

Whatever it was, it could not go through locked doors. Otherwise it would have entered the apartment. That was a comforting thought, and Magruder felt stronger.

"How did you get up here?"

"I walked up. There is a stairway and a door in that niche. Nobody was looking."

The voice was liquid, but thick. A liquid metal like mercury. Magruder thought. He was calmer now.

"You got Carol Dorne last night."

"No. Not I."

Suddenly the voice changed. It was entreating, pleading.

"Let me go in the room."

Magruder launched himself in a surprise attack. But the other was quick as lightning. And strong. Magruder's hands were ripped from skin that was strangely cold. And his own punch to the mouth was countered with a shove that sent him sprawling in the doorway.

He started up. And stopped. For he had split the creature's lip. And instead of blood a thick white liquid flowed. Magruder felt sick but he stood his ground.

"You got Carol Dorne," he whis-

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pered accusingly again.

"No. Not I."

"But you know where she is."

"Yes. Please let me in the room. I will send her back to you."

"From where?"

"Murd."

"Never heard of it," Magruder grunted. "And why should I trust you?"

He felt faint again. Raising a hand to brush sweat from his face he found a white powder on his knuckles. And where his fist had landed on the other he could see that there was blood-red skin. Only the hole in the forehead was really white. And shiny, like bone.

"You must trust me," the liquid voice said. *"Please.* Quickly now. The drums are starting."

It was true. Behind Magruder the room was throbbing with a slow muffled beat. He wet his lips. A shrill whistle and Delaney's men would pour up from the floor below. They must have heard the drums.

But that wouldn't bring back Carol Dorne. Magruder remembered her face on the picture.

"If you take me with you," he whispered.

"No."

"Then you don't get in. And I call the police."

"All right then. But quickly."

They went in together. The window was open, and the terrace doors. A cool wind was blowing through the room. And the room itself was a great drum that throbbed. The rhythm caught at Magruder.

Rhythm, he thought. The most primitive thing of all. It filled the room, filled him. Every nerve, every muscle, every single cell in his body throbbed with the rhythm of the drums. The beat came faster and faster and Magruder was sweating.

"Don't be afraid." He felt an icy hand on his.

But he was afraid. His whole body was pulsating now. Faster and faster. The room was fading out and there was nothing but blackness in its place. He tried to wet his lips, tried to get his tongue against his teeth. He had no tongue. He had no teeth.

Only a pulse. Only a throb. Only a beat. The beat of the drums of Murd.

CHAPTER III

OUT OF the blackness he swam slowly into a world of gray which grew lighter and lighter. The beat of the drums slowed until finally it was gone.

They were standing in a cleft between two vertical walls of some quartz-like substance which shimmered in the daylight. Under their feet the ground was hard and silvery, like metal rather than earth. Just ahead of them both walled and ground ended abruptly, and as Magruder's eyes returned to normal focus he saw that they were almost at the edge of a precipice.

"So this is Murd," he said half aloud.

"Yes."

The voice reminded him that he had not come alone, and he turned to his companion. In daylight the other was not a frightening creature at all. Except for the hole above his eyes and the color of his skin, which now showed clearly through the coating of white powder, he was much the same as Magruder.

"Yes, this is Murd," the liquid voice went on. "You wanted to come. I hope you won't be sorry."

"It won't be your fault if I am," Magruder told him. "I insisted on coming along. But there are a few things I would like to know."

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"Later. Right now we had better get out of here if we value our lives."

As though suddenly mindful of a grave danger he took Magruder's hand and began to pull him along, away from the edge of the precipice. Only a few yards from where they had stood the cleft widened into a canyon which ran steeply downward. Here the walls were covered solidly with a mass of vines which trailed their orange tentacles across the floor of the canyon.

Magruder was running swiftly now, keeping close on the heels of the man ahead. Where the danger might be he could not imagine, for there seemed not a living thing in the canyon. Far more likely that he would trip over a trailer and break his neck, Magruder thought.

For the most part he ran with his eyes on the ground. There was no real path, only what seemed a natural part in the orange foliage. Then there was a short stretch of fairly clear space and he was able to look up His eyes widened in horror.

The walls of the canyon had come to life! The vines writhed and undulated like a mass of orange reptiles. And already the motion was being transmitted to the trailers on the canyon floor.

Magruder hurdled a tentacle which thrust itself suddenly up in his path. There was another to be cleared, and then still another. More of them were beginning to move.

Ahead of him his companion tripped and with a leap forward Magruder grabbed him. Already a waving tentacle had twined itself about his leg. Magruder slipped past him and helped him pull free with a yank on his arm.

"How much further?" he gasped as they got started again.

"Not far. But we are almost out of time."

The words lent speed to Lane Magruder's long legs. And fast as he ran he heard the other's footsteps always close on his heels. Would there be enough time? The demoniac plants were in a fury of motion, and each slithering movement brought them closer together. The narrow path was almost obliterated.

Then suddenly the walls of the canyon had ended and directly ahead Magruder saw a small pool which completely blocked the entrance from the outside. But ten feet still remained to be covered, and the reptilian plants were thickest there.

MAGRUDER left his feet in a headlong dive. Clutching vines brushed against the underside of his body. And then he was cleaving the clear, cold water of the pool, holding his breath until he could hold it no more.

On the surface he treaded water and turned to see what had happened to his companion. He was just in time to see the other's heels disappear beneath the surface. An instant later they were both on top, fighting for breath.

They had made it with not a moment to spare. Looking back into the canyon, Magruder saw that the serpentine growth completely covered the floor, the vines intertwined in a writhing, slithering mass. The sight sickened him and he turned his head, then swung about and headed for the opposite shore of the pool. Stretched out for a moment's rest on a bit of grass he turned to the other.

"What was that?" Magruder's voice was trembling.

"The Valley of Lura, the orange death. And the Drums of the Ancients. We are probably the only men who have ever traversed that canyon."

Magruder's eyes went wide with hor-

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ror as a thought struck him.

"But the girl, Carol Dorne! She must have tried to go through! You said she was here too."

"I'm sorry. I had no time to tell you."

Magruder lay back. It was a sickening thought. Carol Dorne trapped by those slithering things, enveloped, overcome.

"What would happen to her?" He hated to ask the question, but curiosity was stronger than nausea.

"Need you ask? It would not be pleasant."

No. It would not. Better to think of other things. He was here now whether he had a reason or not. And there was a great deal he wanted to know about this land of Murd.

"Just where are we?"

His companion pondered the question. Apparently it was not an easy one to answer.

"On Murd. Just as before we were on Earth."

"Yes, but—"

"In relation to Earth, you mean? I simply do not know. The Drums transported us, but whether through space, or time, or something else I can't say."

He leaned on his elbow and smiled.

"I think we are going to be together for a while. We should know each other's names. I am Vergor."

"I'm Lane Magruder." He put out his hand and felt again Vergor's icy one.

"Here's a question I hope you can answer, Vergor. If Murd is not on Earth, how is it you speak English?

"I don't. Nor do you speak my language. You may have noticed that most of the time I'm talking my lips don't move. What each of us gets is the mental image beneath the other's words. Then we translate it into our own tongues."

"That makes sense. We hear with our minds as much as with our ears. But I'd sure like to know the mechanism."

"My advice is to try to leave before you find out too much about Murd."

"That sounds bad. But you were anxious to get back here."

"I left Murd through no fault of my own. I was running away from someone and in a desperate attempt to escape I ran into the Valley of Lura. I was between the Drums when they began to beat."

"And the next thing you knew you were on Earth."

"Yes. I was in that apartment. Some men had been working there, decorating. One of them came back for something he had forgotten and I hid behind a door and saw how different he was from me. I used some white powder from a can in the room to disguise my color. Then I stole some clothes they had left hanging and ran out. Since then I have been trying to get back."

"But how could you be sure you'd land in Murd?"

"I wasn't sure. But I had a reason for wanting to return. There was a woman in my case too."

"I never saw Carol Dorne," Magruder told him. "Just her picture. I'm an amateur criminologist who works with the police occasionally. But the point is, how do the Drums work? Can I be sure they'll take me back to Earth?"

"I don't know."

"Does anybody on Murd know?"

"Perhaps the Hadri. It will be better if you never meet them."

"Why?"

"Because—"

Vergor never finished what he was about to say. His wide, almost colorless eyes were filled with fear as he

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scrambled to his feet. Magruder leaped up beside him.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I heard something. We'd better get out of here."

IT WAS too late. Men poured from behind a mass of foliage a few yards to their left. And their expressions showed they were not friendly.

Vergor's fist clubbed down the first man to reach him. Beside him, Magruder went into action without thinking. He swept aside a pair of hands that reached for his throat, drove a punch home to his opponent's jaw. The man went down.

Magruder felt better. There was nothing like action to take a man's mind off his worries. His fists pumped furiously. Whatever these men were they had only two hands each. They could be hurt. And beside him Vergor was proving that he knew how to fight.

But for every man who went down there was another to take his place. Vergor and Lane were back to back, completely hemmed in. They drove back one attack only to face another. Then the wave of blood-red, icy bodies swept over them, engulfed them.

When they were hauled to their feet again their hands were securely bound behind them. Magruder found himself surrounded by men in short tunics who poked at him curiously and ran their fingers over his skin to see if it would rub off. He looked at Vergor and saw a bitter smile on the Murdan's face.

"Some of your questions about Murd will soon be answered," Vergor told him.

Magruder didn't like the way he said it.

They were shoved down a trail that was hard packed from long use. On both sides were stranger flowers and trees which grew in queer, distorted shapes. Magruder would have liked to tarry but he was pushed rudely along.

At the bottom of a long incline the trail ended, and they were in flatter country. Tilled fields took the place of the disorderly growth. And only a mile or so ahead was a city.

Magruder gasped. Every color of the spectrum glistened from the glassy walls of the city. And the walls rose to form a dome which completely enclosed it.

In the fields thousands of the red skinned men were working, dressed in the same sort of tunics their captors wore. The only difference was in color. The men who surrounded Vergor and Magruder wore garments of rich blue. Those of the fields wore dull gray. And none of the workers raised his head to look at the men who passed.

Magruder was puzzled. Plainly Murd was in many ways a backward land. It was obvious that the men in the fields were little more than slaves. And they worked the ground with pointed sticks. Then too there were those who had captured him and Vergor. Not one carried a weapon of any sort.

Yet the Murdans had also built the city which was now drawing close. And it was a miracle of engineering which Magruder could hardly accept on the evidence of his eyes. For as he came nearer he saw the entire dome was constructed of a single piece.

They entered the city through an opening in the glassy wall. And inside the picture was different. People thronged the wide avenues, all of them wearing blue tunics. And here the men were armed, each of them with some pistol-like weapon at his belt. The women wore bands of jewelled metal across their foreheads. Magruder could not help admiring the grace with which they moved.

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He soon saw where he and Vergor were being taken. In the center of the city a great building rose, towering over all the rest. At the entrance armed men swarmed, apparently a guard of some sort. They parted to let through the party with Vergor and Magruder.

INSIDE there was nothing but a great hall, its sides banked with comfortable seats on which blue-robed Murdans lolled. Thousands of eyes fastened with interest on Magruder as he and Vergor were marched toward the dais at the end of the hall.

Three men sat on that dais, and they were very old. Their red skins were wrinkled, their arms thin and withered. And their old, cruel eyes were intent on a gray robed man who was being held on his knees below them by a pair of armed men.

The trial, if it was a trial, was over quickly. Apparently no consultation between the old ones was necessary. All three nodded with a single motion.

"Destroy him."

The ones in the seats were leaning forward, each apparently afraid that he might not be able to see well. This was execution chamber as well as court, Magruder realized. He saw one of the guards draw the weapon from his belt and point it at the kneeling man.

There was a quick drumming sound, a sound that rose in pitch and intensity. The body of the man on the floor began to quiver, and he staggered to his feet. He turned slowly, unable to control his quivering, his face contorted in agony.

Magruder flushed with anger. This was torture. Around him the hall was filled with laughter at the antics of the agonized victim. And above the laughter rose a shriek that went higher and higher until it choked off.

Magruder stumbled forward as a hand hit his back. Beside him Vergor too was being roughly pushed toward the dais. Both of them were forced to their knees.

"These are the Hadri," Vergor whispered. There was fear in his voice. Magruder had already guessed as much.

"This one," the leader of their captors said, pointing to Vergor, "escaped a long time ago. We found him today near the valley of the Lura. With him was this strange one."

Malevolent eyes drilled into Magruder. The eyes asked questions, and suddenly he knew that without his consent they could not have the answer. For they could know his thoughts only when he himself was trying to communicate them.

"Where are you from?" The question was shot at him.

"From Earth."

"You lie. You have been sent by the Green Ones."

"Never heard of them," Magruder grunted. Unless the Hadri adopted other tactics they were going to get little out of him.

"Again you lie. You cannot deceive the Hadri."

Suddenly Magruder was fed up. He was sick of the cruelty he had seen. And he had a pretty good idea by now of the way things were run in Murd.

"I don't have to deceive you. You're just three old fools who are no better than anyone else."

The great hall was filled with the horrified gasps of the Murdans who lined the walls. Magruder himself found he was holding his breath, waiting for the order he knew was coming. The old eyes glared down at him.

"Destroy him. Slowly."

Magruder saw the deadly weapon slide out of the guard's belt. It came up, and he saw a finger tighten on the trigger. This was it.

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Behind them there was a commotion.

CHAPTER IV

"THEY have caught another White One!" someone shouted.

Down the length of the great hall heads were turning toward the entrance. The weapon which was pointed at Magruder wavered, then was holstered at a command from the Hadri. The old men were looking over his head and Magruder turned to see what was going on.

A group of men, all of them armed, came hurrying down the aisle. And between them they carried a struggling captive. They were almost on him before Magruder saw the ash-blonde hair.

"Carol Dorne!" he gasped.

At the sound of her name the girl stopped struggling. She let the guards set her on her feet. Her clothes were torn and dirty, her face scratched, but to Magruder she looked as good as her photograph. She gaped at him as though unable to believe her eyes.

"A human being! Oh, I'm so glad. I—"

She tottered and would have fallen had Magruder not braced her with his body. He could easily imagine what she had been through. That she was still alive was miracle enough.

"You'll be all right," he told her. "Nothing to worry about."

He wished he could believe his own words. He tried to. Now that he had found Carol Dorne he discovered that he was anxious to live.

"I wish I could believe that," she echoed his thoughts. "Since yesterday I've been lost in this horrible place. Like a nightmare."

Then the men about them were pushing them both to their knees. Slowly the excitement in the great hall faded, the buzzing of conversation ceased. The Hadri looked down on the two.

"It is plain you are not a Murd. Even the Green Ones have the perforation in their foreheads. Never have we seen any like you. From where do you come?"

"From Earth," Magruder said for the second time.

"This you told us before. But where is it?"

Magruder shrugged. A little while ago he had been hoping the Hadri could answer that. Now he knew they were as much in the dark as he.

"You cannot answer that," the Hadri said. "Which proves you lie. If there were such a place you could tell us its location. How did you get here?"

"The Drums brought us," Magruder said.

There was a shocked silence which told him more than words. He should never have mentioned the Drums. If what Vergor said was true, that they were the only ones who had ever been between the Drums, then nobody would believe him.

"Not only do you lie to us, but you dare to tell us this," the Hadri said. "No man sees the Drums and lives."

"Then believe what you want," Magruder bristled.

"We believe you are lying, and we have ways of finding out the truth. You were not alone when you were found. This slave was with you."

A tall, broad-shouldered man came out of the crowd and made his way down the aisle. He wore a blue tunic and carried a weapon with a jewelled handle.

"The slave, Vergor, was mine until he ran away. I claim him."

"We will decide that later, Gren. Perhaps you can cast some light on this matter."

"None. Except that when he escaped he wore the clothes of a slave

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and now he is dressed as this man."

"We see that. It proves that he is in league with them."

"Not at all," Magruder interrupted. There was no use making things harder for Vergor than they had to be. It wouldn't help Carol or him any if Vergor were killed.

"We will hear what the slave has to say about that."

"Nothing." Vergor was defiant, his head thrown back proudly.

"So you defy us too. Very well. The next questioning will be tomorrow. In the Hall of the Ancients."

Vergor started and Magruder saw that he was terror stricken. Perspiration ran down his face in streams and he was biting his lips. But his head was still high.

THE Hadri were looking at Vergor as though they expected him to give in. When they saw he had no intention of saying anything they nodded to the guards. A circle of armed men formed about the three prisoners.

"Wait!"

It was Gren. Evidently he was a man of more than a little importance, for the Hadri stopped the guard with another gesture and waited for Gren to speak.

"I need the slave. Tonight is the harvest of the Serus, and we have not nearly enough men."

"Must it be done tonight?"

"Tomorrow it will be over-ripe. I could also use these two if they might be put in my custody. If not, much may be lost."

"And what if they escape? As the slave did?"

"They cannot escape. The Serus gardens are not like the open fields. And until tonight I will keep the three of them locked in a dungeon."

Whatever the Serus was, it meant a great deal to the Hadri, Magruder recognized. They held a hurried and whispered conference on the dais.

"You may take them, Gren. But see that they are here tomorrow."

The guard around the three stepped back and its place was taken by Gren's own men. Moving quickly they herded Carol and the two men toward the entrance. Gren himself led the way.

Curious men and women gathered in crowds and tried to push close to examine the two who came from another world. But Gren's men kept them at a distance, kept the three captives going at a fast pace.

Magruder was dead tired and so was Vergor. But it was on Carol that the going was hardest. Once she slipped and fell. One of the guards grabbed a handful of her hair and hauled her to her feet again. Her teeth bit into her lips but she refused to scream.

Magruder felt a surge of admiration for her. And at the same time his disgust and hatred for the Murdans rose to a new height. He had a pretty good idea by now of their barbarity.

With a twist of his body he flung himself about so he faced the guard. Magruder's foot shot out and cracked against the Murdan's shin. There was a howl of pain and rage, and for a second time Magruder had one of the pistols pointed at him.

Gren's own hand struck down the gun.

"He will die soon enough. But first he must enjoy the harvest of the Serus —to the full!"

Magruder was under no delusion that Gren meant him a kindness. Maybe it would have been better for him and Carol to die in the valley of the Lura. Compared to what was probably in store for them that would have been a pleasant death.

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AT THE very edge of the city was Gren's palace, a sprawling edifice only slightly smaller than the palace of the Hadri. Gates of the quartz-like material swung wide and then shut behind the party.

Slaves were everywhere in the palace. The grey-tuniced men and women kept their eyes down as the three captives were marched down long corridors. Apparently the women slaves did little work, and Magruder noted that in figure and grace they were more than the equals of their mistresses.

He noticed too that Vergor was staring at one of the women slaves in particular. She stood at the end of the corridor down which they marched, a beautifully formed young girl whose eyes flashed as she saw Vergor. Then her head was bowed again, sadly.

There was a door at the end of the corridor, and beyond it a flight of stairs which led down into the bowels of the palace. The air was musty here, and in the half-light Magruder saw a row of heavy doors. One of the doors was open and the party paused before it.

"In here," Gren ordered.

"Wait," Magruder said as one of the guards shoved him into the cell. "If you want us to do any work tonight you'd better untie our hands."

Gren hesitated. Yet what Magruder had said was right. The three had been too conscientiously bound. By night their arms and hands would be so numb that it would take hours to restore circulation.

"Very well. They cannot escape."

The sinister guns covered the three as their bonds were cut from them. A moment later the heavy door had shut behind them and they were alone in the tiny cell.

As soon as he was sure the guards were gone Magruder got to work. Using his knuckles he tapped and found it locked from the outside in a manner which prevented its being picked. And all the air in the cell came from a tiny vent far upon the wall.

"I guess we're stuck here until Gren comes for us," Magruder shrugged. He turned to the girl.

"I'm Lane Magruder. I was helping the police look for you after you vanished. And this is Vergor, a native of Murd."

"You keep calling this Murd. But what is it, and where? One minute I was in that penthouse and the next minute I was standing at the edge of a cliff. I was so frightened I started to run. Then those awful things began crawling for me in that canyon. By the time I got out I was so terror stricken I couldn't think. I just wandered around until I was picked up."

"I know how you felt," Magruder said sympathetically. "I went through it myself. And as for answering your questions, I'm certainly going to try."

"They cannot be answered." Vergor was bitter. "I thought the Hadri knew. But even they don't. They are as afraid of the Drums as any Murdan."

"What about those guns?"

"Yes, they know how to use them. But the power comes from the Drums of the Ancients."

"And who were the Ancients?"

"No one knows. They lived on Murd eons ago. It is said that in those days there were no masters and no slaves. Even the Green Ones were peaceful. The Ancients built this city."

"I thought so," Magruder grunted. "It would take a high order of civilization to do the job. And so far I've seen no indication of any machinery which would show the presence of such a civilization."

"No. All that is left is the evil power of the Drums. Nothing which was good remained."

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"But if nobody knows how the Drums work how will we ever get back to Earth?" Carol asked plaintively.

"I think I've got the glimmer of an idea," Lane told her. "At least what the principle is. It's based on the new theories of matter: that matter is nothing more than a pulsation of energy, which comes and goes at the rate of billions of times a minute."

"I'm afraid I'm not very scientific," Carol smiled. "I know what a pulse is, but not much about energy or matter."

"That's enough for our purpose, which is after all theoretical. A pulse comes and goes, throbs. So does energy. And if it goes it must go somewhere. Murd is the other end of the beat. At a certain point the Drums have the power to attune us to that beat. Who knows if the Ancients are not really our ancestors, and if they didn't use the Drums to migrate to Earth millions of years ago?"

"It must be so!" Vergor cried excitedly. "We have a legend which says that there will come a day when the Drums will beat as they did in those days. Then the children of the Ancients will return to restore our freedom."

"Well, we have returned," Magruder grinned. "But we aren't doing so well. The nice little feudal system you've got seems likely to outlive us."

Carol Dorne had been leaning against a wall but she now came to Magruder's side and put her hand on his arm. She had cheered up considerably.

"At any rate, I feel more hopeful since I've met you, Lane. Anyone who can smile in a spot like this is far from licked."

"Good. That's the way I want you to feel. At least we know we're going to be let out tonight. There might be a chance to escape."

"There is no place where we can go," Vergor said glumly.

"You got away, didn't you?"

"I was fortunate. I was working in the fields when Gren came by and saw me talking with my sweetheart. He liked her and started to drag her away and I struck him. His men were on my heels but I reached the valley of the Lura just as they parted for a few moments. Past that valley there is nothing but rocks and sand. A man would die in a few days."

"Do you mean that all the habitable land in Murd is just the few miles around the city?"

"Exactly."

"Then what about the Green Ones? Whoever are they?"

AT THE mention of the Green Ones Vergor trembled. As cruel and vicious as the Murdan nobility was, it seemed the Green Ones must have it all over them. Here Vergor stood on the brink of torture and death and yet he feared them.

"No one knows. They are devils. Once in several months they raid the fields. But they come in things which fly through the air, such as I saw when I was on Earth. And never has a captive taken by them returned."

"So they have planes?" Magruder mused. "That means they're quite advanced, devils or not. Then why don't they take the city?"

"They cannot penetrate the dome," Vergor explained. "And they have no defense against the vibro-guns. You have not yet seen what the big ones can do."

"And the poor slaves are always in the middle, between their own masters and the raids of the Green Ones," Magruder muttered. "Very reminiscent of a period in the Earth's history. But it didn't last forever."

"It will here. There is no hope. The

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slaves work and the Hadri and nobles take their produce and their women for their own purposes."

"By the way," Carol interrupted, "did you know that slave girl upstairs? She started when she saw you."

"That was Gelda, my sweetheart. Gren is keeping her for the Feast of the Serus."

Magruder was pacing the floor. There were so many things he wanted to know and so little time to learn them. Not only his life, but Carol's too might depend on a knowledge of some small fact.

"What's the significance of the Serus?"

"It's a plant which blooms only one night in the year. From it a certain drink is made which the nobles use at the Feast. And also another substance which the Hadri use and which gives them longer life."

"But why did Gren insist that we be turned over to him for tonight?"

"Because all who harvest the Serus must die. Apparently he hasn't enough slaves to spare. And since the Serus gardens are his the Hadri had to give in to him. He is the most powerful of the nobles."

"And tomorrow? What happens in the Hall of the Ancients?"

"I have seen only one who was questioned there. He was dead. The Hadri made the slaves bury him so that we should be frightened. Blood oozed from every pore and his face was so contorted that we could not recognize him."

Carol started to shudder and Magruder put his arm around her shoulder. He kept it there even after she stopped shaking but she didn't seem to mind.

"I guess it's tonight or not at all, then," he said. "We'll make a break for it the first chance we get."

Vergor shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry to dash your hopes, but escape won't be possible. The gardens will be surrounded by armed men."

"Then we'll at least die fighting," Magruder told him.

His eyes met Carol's and she smiled bravely. It was too bad, he thought, that dreams had to end this way so often. He had followed a face on a photograph and found that the girl the face belonged to was just what he'd thought she'd be.

"It's all my fault," she said. "If it weren't for me you'd be safe now."

"If I had it to do over again," Magruder told her, "I'd do exactly what I did."

CHAPTER V

IT WAS several hours before Gren came to get them, and when Magruder saw the number of armed men the noble led his heart fell. Gren was taking no chances.

The three were marched quickly up the stairs and out of the palace into a moonlit night. Overhead the dome glistened and the streets were almost as bright as day.

The gardens were just outside the walls, but separated from the field by a low wall. Already there were slaves at work, and on the wall stood armed men at short intervals. Those who had escorted Carol and Vergor and Magruder took up similar positions.

White blossoms covered the ground so thickly that they seemed like a blanket of snow. Each flower was the size of a rose in full bloom, and their combined scent was sickeningly sweet and overpowering.

Vergor picked up a short, curved knife from a pile of them which lay inside the wall. Magruder and Carol followed his example, followed him as

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he took a basket from a nest of them. Vergor needed no instructions. All that had to be done was to imitate other slaves.

No attempt was made to separate the three. Working side by side they bent to cut the Serus blossoms. Alongside them other slaves were busy doing the same, busy filling their baskets, but the movements of these others were robot-like. They knew they were doomed and already the life seemed gone from them.

Near the low wall one of the slaves suddenly dropped his knife and basket and straightened up. Whether he meant to run or was merely resting for a moment Magruder never found out. For instantly a vibro-gun was pointed at the man. This slave died slowly, his scream going on and on above the drumming of the gun. It was a warning to the others.

"We've got to work our way close to the wall," Lane muttered to Vergor.

"Yes. Our only chance would be to attack them before they can turn their guns on us," Vergor agreed. "And we have our knives for weapons."

But the plan was frustrated before it was fully started. As the three began drifting from the row in which they worked Magruder felt the guns turn with them. One of the guards barked a loud command.

"Stay where you are! One step more and you die!"

Magruder's insides were tied in a knot and he felt the knife slip against his sweating palm. It was no use. The guards were too wary. Turning his head, Lane saw that Carol's face wore a mask of hopelessness. Vergor was going back to work, and now his movements were dull, like those of the other automatons. And already their row was almost finished. The end of the harvest was close.

As silently as hawks the green ships swooped down on the field. The guards were caught completely by surprise, a dozen of them swept from the wall as a ship came in low for a landing.

By the time Magruder got his head up hatches were swinging open. Green-skinned men poured out in waves, spreading swiftly to scoop up slaves who were paralyzed by fright. Others of the Green Ones carried weapons which sent a hail of pellets toward the guards on the walls.

BUT cruel as the nobles of Murd might be they were not cowards. For only an instant did surprise hold them. The drumming of the vibro-guns filled the air as they swung into action.

Disregarding the stupefied slaves Gren's men left the walls and raced over the fields toward the green ships. Now the guns were pitched high and green men were beginning to fall. Fully a third were cut down before they could take a backward step.

Near Magruder one of the Green Ones halted. Apparently a leader, the green man waved his comrades back toward the ship they had come from. But he was too late. From three sides the Murdans converged on him and his crew.

"Take them alive!" someone shouted.

The green men were confused. Those who carried weapons were given no chance to use them. The rest were trapped. Magruder felt Carol Dorne's hand on his.

"Now is our chance. Let's run for it!"

His mind raced. By the time they could get past the walls the fight would be over. Pursuit would come too quickly for them to get away. And yet to stay meant torture and death. There was only one other possibility.

"Follow me," he told the girl. "You

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too, Vergor. And don't be afraid to use your knife!"

The Murdan guards were already past them. Before they were aware of the danger from behind, Magruder and Vergor were on them. Two knives rose as one and sank into blue-tuniced backs.

Startled, a Murdan whirled and aimed his gun at Magruder. But Lane's foot shot out to hit his thigh and throw him off balance. Before the Murdan could get his hand up again Magruder had scooped up a dead man's gun. The man from Earth shot from the hip, the gun vibrating against the heel of his palm.

Beside him Vergor had picked up a vibro-gun and was using it on the Murdans. Two of them went down, then another, as Magruder cut loose again. The rest of the Murdans came around to meet the unexpected attack.

But now the green men went into action, quickly taking advantage of the chance Magruder and Vergor had given them. The Murdans were caught from two sides at once. Their line shattered, and before it could re-form the green men broke through.

Magruder grabbed Carol's hand and dragged her along with him as he and Vergor ran with the Green Ones toward their ship. Before anyone could stop them he had lifted her through an open hatch and was beside her. Behind them came Vergor and then a flood of green-skinned men. The hatch swung out and at a shouted command the slender ship lifted.

Other green ships were taking to the air with them. Out of a porthole Magruder saw them, long and cigar shaped, of some strange metal. He also saw something else below, something that froze his blood.

Directly above the palace of the Hadri the great dome was opening! And from the roof of the palace rose a battery of giant guns. Ahead of Magruder the green skinned commander yanked back a control stick and the ship shot straight up like an arrow.

A great drumming sound filled the air, penetrated into the ship itself. To the left a green ship was caught by the giant vibro-guns and Magruder saw it shudder. Then it went out of control, twisting end over end, shaken from stem to stern.

It broke into fragments that fell to the ground like a green snow. And mixed with falling bits of metal were the bodies of slaves and green men. The great drumming grew louder.

AND ther own ship began to tremble. They would never be able to get out of that deadly beam of vibration, Magruder knew. For the ship continued straight up without any attempt to evade it.

He leaped for the control stick, swept the commander out of the way. Before anyone could stop him Lane had thrown the stick forward, then to the side. The ship went into a screaming dive to the side. Men shouted as they were thrown in all directions.

Magruder clung to the stick with all his strength as they rocketed downward. Directly for the dome he headed, then at the last possible moment yanked upward again. Frantically the men who manned the guns tried to keep him in their sights.

Again he threw the ship into a sideslip. By the time the guns had swung downward again he was levelling off. The shuddering of the green ship grew less and was gone. And they were hurtling low above a desert bathed in moonlight.

Now that it was over Magruder found that he was sweating profusely, his arms gone suddenly weak. It had

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been a close call, as close as any he had ever experienced. The green man he had pushed from the control stick was at his side and Magruder motioned him to take over.

"I'm sorry I had to be so rough—"

"There was no time for politeness," the commander dismissed the apology.

He was a tall man, powerfully built, with a proud bearing and direct eyes of a luminous green. With no trace of nervousness he took the stick and changed course slightly, then turned to scrutinize Magruder.

"I am Beral, commander of the Green Fleet. Twice tonight you saved my life and the lives of my men. Yet you are not of Murd. Why did you do it?"

"To save our own lives," Lane admitted frankly. "I didn't know for sure what we were getting into; but I knew well enough what we were getting out of."

"Were you a slave?"

"No. You guessed it when you said the girl and I were not of Murd. It would be hard to explain who we are and how we got here."

"From a man who saved my life I do not demand explanations. Yet I admit astonishment at the way you handled this ship. Never have I seen such a thing."

"I commanded a squadron of flying ships in my own country's air fleet during a war," Magruder explained.

"Will you teach us how?"

"Be glad to do it."

"Good. It will save many lives in the future. And we have none to spare."

Beral's eyes appraised Magruder. Apparently the commander liked what he saw for he nodded and turned his attention to Carol. His stare was frankly curious, but respectful, and when she smiled at him he responded with a friendly smile of his own.

Other green men clustered about her, examining her gravely. One of them reached out a tentative finger and Carol let him touch her arm. He grunted with surprise.

"It is warm!"

"Don't frighten her," Beral snapped.

The men stepped away and the commander turned his attention to Vergor. Magruder knew Vergor was inwardly frightened, yet he showed no fear. Beral nodded again.

"Your tunic shows you to be a slave. But you hold your head up like a man. And you were not afraid to fight."

"I too fought for my own life," Vergor told him stoutly.

"As every man should." Beral's tone became one of wonder. "But for a Murdan not to fear the Green Ones! Not to fear the green devils who eat human flesh!"

HIS men broke into shouts of laughter, and Beral himself chuckled. Vergor stared at them in astonishment.

"Then it isn't so?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you always raiding our city and taking off slaves?" Vergor was frankly skeptical.

"So that the Green Race should not die out. We have five men to every woman. You will find that almost all the slaves we've taken have been women."

"But where do you take them?" Vergor wanted to know. He was gaining confidence. "There is nothing but desert on all of Murd."

"Yes," Beral said bitterly. "Only one fertile spot, and one city which our own ancestors helped to build. And we are denied the right to live there. When the Ancients left we were driven into the desert by the Red Ones. And they call us barbarians!"

He jammed the stick forward angrily and the nose of the ship tilted down-

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ward. Below them Magruder saw only white sands, and a little way ahead rose the face of a barren cliff. The other ships of the fleet were slanting down as if for a landing. But where?

He had his answer in a moment. As they drew close to the base of the cliff a black spot appeared. The spot grew larger until it became the yawning mouth of a huge cavern. Without hesitation Beral guided his ship into the great hole. Behind him the others followed.

Deep into the bowels of the mountain they burrowed, with no relief from the blackness. Then gradually it began to lighten and Magruder could see ahead. They were approaching some sort of landing field.

Men came running to greet them, the first to reach Beral's ship was an older man, tall and straight and with an air of authority. His face was lined with years of worry and responsibility. While others cheered as ships unloaded fresh slaves, his first words to Beral were despondent.

"You've lost a ship."

"And we were fortunate at that, Haras," Beral said. "If not for these three here my own ship would never have left the ground. And this one," he pointed to Magruder, "saved us even after we were aloft."

Beral introduced the older man as Haras, chief of the council. Past the landing field Magruder saw a city spread on the floor of the immense cavern. Apparently it was governed in some sort of democratic fashion. His inference was proved correct as Haras took his hand.

"I extend to you the gratitude of all our people," the older man said. "We can ill afford to lose a ship."

Vergor was staring about him in astonishment and Haras and Beral gave their attention to the Murdan.

"What is it?"

"I see former slaves walking about without guards, as free as any of the nobles of our city."

"There are no slaves here," Haras told him. "Each man is his own master and has an equal voice in choosing his leaders. And as long as our city of Kuna shall stand it will remain so."

But there was a sadness in the proud voice which made Magruder look at Haras with narrowed eyes. Even Beral, who seemed the sort that did not discourage easily, was downcast. He saw too that the rejoicing among the green men had died down as they realized one of the ships had failed to return.

"After all, you did make a pretty fair haul," Magruder said to Beral.

Beral shook his head. "The price was far too high. You will learn why later."

AS THEY went along toward the city, Haras, who sensed Magruder's curiosity, pointed out the interesting features of the great cavern and tried to explain them. The light which evenly illuminated the vast expanse came from the rock itself. In reply to Lane's question about a small lichen which grew everywhere on the ground, Haras was more explicit.

"The *merta*. It is our only source of food. After centuries our people have found a variety of ways in which to prepare it. Fortunately it contains all the food substances necessary to sustain life."

"And water?"

We have a few springs. Also a certain porous rock which burns easily. And out of those things and some metals which are to be found here we have built this city and managed to remain alive."

"You've done more than that," Lane protested. "Those airships are marvels

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of engineering."

"Not at all. They are constructed from a metal which is lighter than air. It also has certain magnetic properties which furnish the driving power of the ships."

"What about the weapons I saw in use?"

"You must also have seen how ineffectual they were. They use the power of coiled springs to shoot metal balls."

Magruder nodded. He could see that the green men had done very well with the materials they had at hand. But against the vibro-guns of the red Murdans they were powerless.

"Nevertheless you've managed to more than hold your own," he said.

"Yes," Haras admitted. "But that will be true no longer. The supply of metal for the airships is exhausted. We face an insoluble problem. On the one hand we must make raids or the race will die out. Yet each raid brings us closer to the end of our air fleet. And when that is gone—"

He did not have to finish. When that was gone it would mean the passing of a brave people. Magruder felt anger rise within him. The fields of the red Murdans were fertile enough to support both races, but they supported only the nobles of one.

Given the opportunity and the materials these green men could have built a flourishing civilization. The others had only one scientific device, and that was an evil one. But with that they could doom the Green Race to extermination.

And how about himself and Carol Dorne? Their immediate plight was far from desperate. But they too were doomed to remain on Murd, and that was a prospect Magruder did not relish. He had a few ideas, though and the sooner he got to work on them the better.

"If it isn't too presumptuous," he said to Haras, "I should like to offer a suggestion. It's based on my own personal experience with war and on a study of many campaigns."

"We shall welcome any suggestions you might make," the older man assured him.

"Good. The basic facts are clear. You're nearing the end of your resources, yet every raid further depletes them and weakens you more. The rest is simply logic. All the strength you can muster will have to be thrown into an all-out attack with the intention of taking the city. And the longer you wait the less chance you'll have."

"Your reasoning cannot be denied," Haras told him. "The council was forced to the same conclusion at its last meeting."

"But there is one thing you've forgotten," Beral cut in. "We haven't a chance of breaking into the city and we have no defense against the vibro-guns. They would wipe us out before we reached the gates."

CHAPTER VI

MAGRUDER had not forgotten that. For the moment his mind was busy with other details. There was a chance which both Beral and Haras overlooked. Patterns of action had been developed in the green men which they themselves could not break. An outsider might see possibilities which had not occurred to them. It was Vergor who broke the gloomy silence which had developed.

"I have it! The plan you've been discussing is bound to fail. But there is a way to take the city."

"How?" Beral and Haras were both skeptical.

"By attacking simultaneously from

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both inside and out! The slaves are so submissive that the nobles don't fear them. And many of them come into the city at night. What if the slaves revolted at the moment you attacked?"

"That would be perfect," Beral agreed. "But they won't revolt."

"They would if they have someone to lead them. I'm positive I could do it."

Haras and Beral were looking at each other, their eyes suddenly hopeful. They could not help being affected by Vergor's enthusiasm. But Haras thought of a difficulty.

"The idea is excellent. And we could land you even tonight, within an hour's walk of the city. But you too are under sentence of death. If you were caught the whole plan would fail."

"He doesn't have to be caught," Carol interrupted.

They stared at her in astonishment. Until now they had completely forgotten about her. She had her purse open and was excitedly rummaging through the contents. While they watched she brought out a slender cylinder.

"My lipstick," she announced proudly. "It's almost exactly the color of Vergor's skin. I know enough about make-up to disguise him so he'll never be recognized."

"It isn't necessary to do anything now," Haras told her. "The plan seems good, but first there must be a meeting of the council."

"Then call it now," Vergor said. "One week from tonight is the Feast of the Serus. That will be the ideal time to strike. And even without disguise I'm sure I could manage the thing."

Men with toil worn hands and wise eyes sat around the council table of Kuna. But no amount of wisdom could solve this problem. It was the most crucial one they would ever be called on to decide, yet it all depended on a gamble.

They listened carefully as Vergor outlined his plan of action. His belief in himself was so complete that it could not help but sway them. In a corner of the council room Magruder whispered to Beral and Haras, and when the chief of the council returned to the table he seemed convinced.

"I speak only for myself," he said. "But I think it should be done. And since there is no time to lose we had better vote on it now."

If there had been doubt in the council's mind before Haras spoke there was none now. The vote was by a show of hands. And the council was unanimous in its approval.

Then, while they watched, Carol went to work on Vergor. Deftly she applied the lipstick to his mouth, to the corners of his eyes. When she was done with his eyes and his mouth had grown smaller. Faint wrinkles were filled in so that he seemed younger. With an eyebrow pencil she changed the appearance of his teeth.

MURMURS of astonishment rose from about the table. The change in Vergor was so great that it was unbelievable. One council member, a former Murdan himself, swore he could not tell where Nature ended and art began.

Beral cut short any further inspection of Carol's handiwork.

"We'd better get started now. Not many hours of darkness remain."

Magruder shook Vergor's hand. "Good luck. We'll see you exactly one week from tonight."

"And at this same hour," Vergor told him, "the feast will have just passed its height and the nobles will be confused by drink. I promise you the slaves will rise at exactly the moment you land."

They watched Beral's ship until it

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disappeared into the blackness of the tunnel to the outside. Carol's eyes were moist when Magruder turned to face her.

"It takes real bravery to do what Vergor's doing," she said.

"Real bravery," he echoed grimly.

Haras was impatient. All the while Beral's ship had been preparing to take off he had watched glumly. Now he was eager to get away from the landing field.

"You had many things you wanted to do," he reminded Magruder.

"I haven't forgotten," Lane assured him. "But before we go any further I'd like you to give this some more thought. You're staking a great deal on me. And you never laid eyes on me until tonight."

"No," Haras admitted. "I can only trust whatever insight my years have given me into the character of men. I don't think you will fail us."

He chuckled and shook his head admiringly.

"After all, until today you did not dream Murd existed. And still you saw something which we had never realized, that on some of our raids our enemies must have captured one or two of our men alive. Then too, you saw the significance of other things which had escaped us entirely."

"There are a good many things I'm interested in, including human psychology," Magruder admitted. "Some of those things should help solve the technical problems ahead of us."

He was still carrying in his belt the vibro-gun he had taken from the dead Murdan. Now he removed it, bent to scoop up a handful of sand, and began to rub it briskly on the stock of the gun. Carol and Haras watched him.

"What's that for?" she wanted to know.

"Just testing to see if my reasoning was correct," he told her. He showed them the scratches the sand had made on the shiny stock.

"But what does that prove?"

"Merely that the vibro-guns do wear out in time."

Magruder was keyed to a high pitch. He hoped the other ideas he had about the deadly guns were equally correct. If they were, there might be a surprise in store for the Hadri and the Murdan nobles. But first he had to get some details out of the way.

"About those two ships you said were damaged in previous raids," he said to Haras. "You're sure they'll be ready a week from tonight?"

"They are almost ready now," Haras assured him. "The building in which they are being repaired is at the other end of the city, but I can take you there if you wish."

"That won't be necessary. What I want now is a place where I can work. And some capable assistants. Later I may need the help of every artisan in Kuna."

"All our resources are at your command. As for help, you will find that every citizen of Kuna is a skillful worker. In order that you should know exactly how much to expect I had better show you our workshops."

"Good idea," Magruder agreed. "And right now is the time."

SO OCCUPIED with his plans had he been that he had almost forgotten Carol. Turning to her now Lane saw how tired she looked.

"Do you mind if I don't go along?" she asked. "I feel as though I hadn't slept in weeks."

"You can stay at my own house," Haras suggested. "My wife will see that you are made comfortable. We'll go there first and then proceed to the shops."

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Whatever the green men of Kuna lack in raw materials, Magruder learned quickly, they made up in intelligence and energy. Primitive forges used bellows cunningly contrived from impregnated cloth. Tools were simple but well made.

He picked up a tiny saw which lay on the bench of a worker who was patiently hammering a lump of metal into a thin sheet. The worker did not pause and Lane had to tap him on the shoulder.

"How strong is this saw?" Magruder asked.

"It will cut metal. If you have enough patience."

"Good." He laid the vibro-gun on the bench. "I want you to saw this gun in half, lengthwise. But see that nothing inside is damaged."

The metal worker picked up the gun and examined it. With the saw he tested the stock and then the barrel. He looked up smiling.

"It will take almost no time at all."

Working slowly at first he cut a fine groove all the way around. Once the guide line was exact his movements became swift. His hand drew the tiny saw back and forth in a smooth and tireless rhythm. Quickly and surely the groove deepened as he turned the gun in his hand. There was a pause for examination and then he tapped the gun on the edge of the bench. It split evenly, exactly down the center.

Excitedly Lane examined the maze of wires and tiny tubes which lay exposed in a casing of the quartz-like material of which the city of Murd was constructed. Pressing the two halves of the gun together again he pointed it toward the ground and pulled the trigger. There was a very faint hum.

"Good. Just what I thought."

"Do you mean you understand how it works?" Haras asked in amazement.

"At least the principle of the thing. The hook-up is different from any I've ever seen or read about. And this shiny stuff has certain strange properties."

"Then how will you duplicate it?" Haras drooped with disappointment.

"I don't intend to. But if I can make a generator and an interrupter we'll still be able to hand the Hadri a surprise."

"What are those things?"

"We use them on Earth. But they'd be hard to explain. If you've got a bit of the metal you make the airships from I can see quickly enough whether I can make them or not."

LANE slept little that day. The light metal was hard and difficult to work. Hours passed before a small horseshoe was made of some. And many more hours were needed to draw a few yards of wire by hand.

The finished product was crude. But it worked. Magruder knew how Faraday must have felt as he watched the spark leap from one lead-off wire to the other.

It was a beginning. But it was just the beginning. To construct the thing on a large scale was merely a repetition of what they had done once, and the workers sailed into the job.

The trouble came with the other equipment Magruder needed. With nothing but a knowledge of principles and an excellent memory for diagrams he had once perused he went to work. Almost everything had to be done twice.

Carol saw him for a few minutes each day and then he was almost too tired to speak to her. Already he was hoarse from the constant stream of instructions he issued to the workers. Fortunately they were quick to learn. And when it came to willingness to work he had never seen their equals.

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On the sixth day the job was done. All that remained was the installation. When that was finished Magruder had only one desire, to sleep. Tension had mounted to the breaking point.

"Are you certain it will work?" Beral asked.

"No. How can I be certain?" Lane shrugged wearily. "I've tested a model but there's no way to test the big one."

"I shouldn't have asked," Beral smiled. "There's no turning back now. But I suppose there isn't one of us who isn't worried. What if it doesn't work?"

Magruder nodded slowly. That was the sixty-four dollar question.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS still the question as the fleet of slender green ships hovered over the gleaming city. But now was no time to think of it.

"Vergor must have seen us by now," Beral was saying. He threw the stick forward and slanted the ship toward the gates, then turned to Lane and Carol.

"It's a pretty complicated plan. I hope it works."

"That's all we can do, is hope," Magruder smiled. "If it doesn't—well, I couldn't ask to die in better company."

The ground was rushing up at them and there was no more time for talk. Men gathered around the hatches, some holding bulky spring-powered guns. All wore swords under their tunics.

The gates were open. They could see that even before they landed. Beral cut speed sharply, flattened out, and they landed with hardly a jar less than twenty feet from the gates.

Many raids had made them adept at these tactics. By the time Lane swung the first hatch open the other ships were alongside. Waves of green men poured out, formed quickly into tight squads. Directly ahead was the broad avenue.

There was no one to oppose their entrance into the city of Murd. As he came through the gates with the first squad Magruder could see down the entire length of the wide street. And directly in front of the palace of the Hadri was a milling, shouting throng of slaves and nobles.

"Just as you said it would be," Beral grunted to Magruder.

The fleet commander turned in time to see the last of the green men come through the gates. Weapons were coming up to shoulders as they ran down the street. Until now not a single cry of alarm had been raised.

And then, so quickly that they had no defense, they were surrounded! From every building came Murdan nobles to block the way ahead, to cut off retreat, to prevent the green men from fanning out. Hundreds of vibro-guns made a circle of death around the invaders.

The ambush had been perfect. There was no more throng in front of the palace. It had dissolved into separate groups of nobles and slaves. More Murdans with blue tunics were coming up.

Cruel eyes were fastened on the green men, fingers were taut on triggers. There was a moment of silence. Then the ranks of the nobles parted and two men came through. One of them was Gren. And the other was Vergor!

His disguise was gone, and gone too was the gray tunic of the Murdan slave. The blue garment Vergor wore was of the finest cloth. The gun in his hand glittered with jewels. A triumphant smile played on his lips.

"So that's the way it is," Magruder said.

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"Exactly," Vergor grinned. "You see me now in my true colors. Vergor, brother of Gren and greatest noble of Murd."

He made a mocking bow to Carol.

"My own disguise was not bad, was it? Nor my acting?"

"But I don't understand," she said bewildered. "You mean that the whole thing was planned for the purpose of trapping us all?"

"That should be obvious. Of course there was much I had to improvise. I hadn't planned on bringing guests to Murd when I returned from Earth. Once you were here I thought it advisable to wait and see how I could use you. And as slave I could gain your confidence."

"But you couldn't have planned on the raid last week."

"No. And I pride myself especially that I was so quick to see the opportunity and seize it. That was a stroke of genius, if I may say so."

"I don't believe that," Carol told him. "You didn't have a chance to speak to anyone since you and Lane got here."

"Our methods of communication with each other are more highly developed than I led you to believe," Vergor told her. "It wasn't necessary for me to speak to anyone."

Carol's eyes were still doubtful. She looked at Magruder and Beral, then back at Vergor.

"How did you know you'd have a chance to get back here?"

"We knew the situation in Kuna. There are ways to get information from prisoners. I proposed the scheme myself, if you remember."

"You were right all the way," Beral said admiringly to Magruder.

Carol stared at them in astonishment. She had missed much in the last week. Vergor's eyes widened.

"So you thought of that," he murmured. "I suspected you were of a high intelligence. We'll be able to make use of you."

"I still don't understand," Carol insisted. "Why was the whole thing necessary?"

"Because we needed the airships," Vergor told her. "And this was the only way I could see of getting them undamaged."

"But why do you need them at all?"

VERGOR smiled and shrugged, "Perhaps Magruder can answer that question."

"It happens I can," Lane told him. "They were all that was necessary for the Murdan invasion of Earth."

Vergor's eyes shot up in astonishment. Apparently he had been saving that announcement as a triumph for himself.

"There were a few things wrong with your act," Magruder went on. "Only a man with the greatest self-confidence and ability could have remained on Earth as long as you without being noticed. And those are not the marks of a slave."

"Pretty good," Vergor admitted.

"Furthermore, the Murdan knowledge of how the Drums operate was plainly greater than you said it was. You went to Earth knowing you could come back. And you went as an advance scout. The Murdans were looking for a fresh world to conquer."

"Then why did you come back to Murd with me?" Vergor asked.

"I didn't know all that until after I got here. Shall I go on?"

Vergor hesitated but Lane was not waiting for a reply. He was anxious to keep talking.

"In the vibro-guns you had a weapon which could have won the Earth. Except for one thing, air power. You

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soon found out that there was no defense against bombing from the air except with planes. And the Green Ones could supply those."

"How could you be sure?" Vergor demanded.

"That was easy," Magruder smiled. "I tested the vibro-gun I had with me and found it showed wear quickly. Yet it was new, and so were all the others I'd seen here. That meant you knew how to manufacture them."

Vergor's manner had grown wary. It was plain that his mind was busy with the implications of what Magruder had said.

"If you know all that why did you let me come back here?"

"I had a few tricks up my own sleeve. If you were kept in Kuna how could Carol and I get back to Earth? On a direct attack we probably couldn't get into this city. And even if we did there was a good chance that the mechanism-of-the-Drums-would-be-damaged. This was the only way I could think of getting in without a fight."

"Too bad you failed," Vergor said in mock consolation.

"We haven't, yet. Look up."

Vergor's eyes went upward. Up above the dome, above the palace of the Hadri, a green ship hovered. And from the stern of the ship an antenna dangled. Vergor laughed.

"Now see what happens."

The dome was opening, and from the roof of the palace a battery of big guns swung upward. There was a drumming and the green ship began to shudder. Magruder held his breath. This was it.

The drumming grew louder. But now there was a new note. The beats seemed to be coming closer and closer together until they blended into a single note.

The green ship stopped shuddering. It sank quickly, so quickly that the dome could not close in time. And as it touched the roof of the palace green men swarmed from it to overrun the men who manned the guns.

"How do you like that?" Magruder asked.

He took a step toward Vergor and the Murdan noble retreated. The vibro-gun in Vergor's hand came up and he pressed the trigger. Nothing happened.

"How—" he gasped unbelievingly.

"Your guns are turned against themselves," Lane said.

He took another step forward and Vergor retreated again. Magruder kept talking.

"It was simple once I got the idea. All I had to do was construct a set that picked up the waves from your guns and sent them right back. Except that it sends them back off beat. So the hollows of the waves are filled in and there's no drumming, only a sustained sound which does no harm."

He took another step—and Vergor threw his gun away, looked wildly around. At swords point his men were being forced to surrender.

"I've been talking just to give the men in the palace time to take over," Magruder told him. "The Hadri are already captured. It's too late to damage the Drums."

"Not yet," Vergor breathed.

He flung himself around and was running before anyone could lay a hand on him. The move caught Magruder by surprise. By the time he got going Vergor was yards away and heading straight for the palace.

THE Murdan noble could run. Magruder's flying feet ate up ground at a prodigious rate but he gained only inches. At the palace entrance he skidded to a stop, swung in. Vergor was half way down the great hall.

Their footsteps echoing hollowly in

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the empty palace, the two men raced toward the dais. Somewhere above them Magruder heard the sound of running men. But the Hadri were gone, their three identical thrones vacant.

Vergor leaped upon the dais and Magruder thought the Murdan had gone mad when he saw him rush to the center throne. But now Vergor seized both arms of the throne and was swinging it so that it faced toward the back wall. A great section of the wall slid back.

A light shone through from behind the opening and as Magruder followed Vergor he saw that the wall had concealed a stairway which led down into the bowels of the palace. At breakneck speed he piled down the stairs after the Murdan.

Near the bottom the stairs curved. Taking the curve at full speed Vergor slipped and Magruder gained a few feet. When he reached the corridor which opened off the stairway he was only ten feet behind the Murdan.

The corridor was short, ending in a vast room. Thousands of small vibro-guns in all stages of manufacture were scattered about, and at the far end Magruder saw the gleaming barrels of guns larger than those on the palace roof.

Three men were in the great room besides Magruder and Vergor. They were the Hadri. And they must have got there only minutes earlier for they were running down a long aisle as fast as their old legs could carry them. Vergor swung down the same aisle.

Now Lane could see what Vergor's destination was. The aisle ended in a great control panel, a gleaming single sheet of the quartz-like material. One side of the panel was bare except for a large switch.

The Hadri turned frightened faces backward at the sound of the thudding feet behind them. At the sight of Vergor they brightened, then were panic stricken again as they saw Magruder so close behind.

Without ceremony Vergor brushed the old men aside. They were like ancient withered dolls, and his momentum bowled them over, sent them sprawling to block the way behind him.

A frantic leap carried Magruder over their heads. But even that took time. Already Vergor was at the end of the aisle and reaching for the switch on the far side. Magruder could not possibly reach him in time to prevent him from throwing it.

With a speed born of desperation Lane's hand darted out to sweep a finished vibro-gun from a bench and fling it toward the panel in a single motion. It caught Vergor in the side of the head just as his hand touched the switch, knocked him off balance.

Magruder was on him before he could come around again. Lane's fists hammered blows at the Murdan, brought the white liquid in a stream from his lips. The advantage was Magruder's, but Vergor was not finished yet.

Even as he fell his arms went around the taller man's legs. Magruder's feet shot out from under him and the back of his head hit the floor. Half dazed he saw Vergor scoop up the gun he had thrown.

HE CAUGHT the Murdan's wrist, held on grimly while his head cleared. But Vergor had the strength of a madman. The gun turned slowly inward. Magruder brought his forehead down sharply across the bridge of the Bardan's nose and drew a scream of pain as bone splintered.

Vergor's hand relaxed and before he could recover Magruder had the gun.

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Now the tables were turned. Now it was Lane who was trying to break free as they rolled on the floor.

He had almost succeeded when Vergor's feet caught him in the pit of the stomach. The kick drove Magruder backward and as he came to his knees he saw Vergor leaping for the switch.

Lane's finger tightened on the trigger and the room echoed with the drumming of the vibro-gun. Vergor's leap was arrested in mid-air. For a brief instant his shriek rose above the drumming, and then his shuddering body fell. . . . INSIDE the green ship Beral and Haras said goodby to Lane and Carol. The faces of the green men were troubled.

"Are you sure the Drums will take you back safely?" Beral asked.

"As sure as it's possible to be," Magruder told him. "The beat of the Drums is natural, and only becomes destructive when it is slowed down so that it does not completely permeate the body."

"For better or for worse," Haras said, "this will be the last time they beat. As soon as you are gone we will throw the switch that destroys them. They have never been used for any but evil purposes. And now that the Hadri and the nobles have been eliminated there will be no need for weapons on Murd."

The ship stirred slightly and brushed against the face of the cliff where it hung suspended. Carol turned from the porthole where she had been looking out.

"It's just about the time when the Drums beat every day," she said.

Beral nodded and swung open the hatch. There was a last handshake before Carol and Lane stepped out into the cleft between the two gleaming walls. Then the hatch swung shut and the ship slid away.

The beat came slowly at first and Magruder saw Carol's face whiten with sudden fear. But before he could speak the tempo quickened. He had just enough time to take her hand. His whole body was pulsating now.

Again the blackness came, driving away the daylight. It was a black curtain which fell before them, behind them, enveloped them in its fold.

When the curtain parted they stood on a terrace high above a lake which sparkled in the moonlight. Far below them was the string of lights which marked the Outer Drive. Carol started, looked down at the hand that clasped hers, then up into Lane's face.

"We're home," he said quietly. She shuddered.

"Let's get out of here, Lane. I'm afraid of this place."

"There's nothing to be afraid of any more." He smiled down at her. "After our honeymoon we'll come back here to live."

She pulled her hand free and turned and ran. The door was open and she was in the hall when Magruder caught up with her. Carol's face was white as he bent to kiss her.

"I can still hear those drums in my mind," she trembled. "And as long as we'd live here I'd be afraid they would beat again."

"But Haras and Beral promised they would destroy the drums," he reminded her.

"We'll never be sure."

"Wait. Listen."

The drums were beating again. The two stood tense looking into the room. But the beat was changing. The rhythm was not the same. Suddenly there was a crackling, ripping sound, and the room was silent again.

Magruder looked down at the girl beside him. The fear was draining from her face and she was smiling.

"All right," she said. "After our honeymoon."

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EGYPTIAN FESTIVAL FOR ARES

By KAY BENNETT

THE Egyptians were the first men to make solemn assemblies and processions to the temples of the gods in many scattered cities. They held many festivals each year involving sacrifices honoring their gods. At Papremis they do sacrifice and worship for Ares. When the sun begins to go down, a great multitude of priests stand near the entrance of the temple of Ares with wooden clubs. Opposite them are stationed many thousand other men who have come to the city to make vows. They are also carrying wooden staves. The image of their god, Ares, has been taken from the temple the day before and now is being returned. It is pulled in a little wagon by a few attendants, and when they approach the gateway of the temple the priests try to prevent it from entering. The thousands of men who have come to the city to make their vows, come to the assistance of their god, and strike the priests, who in turn try to defend themselves. There is always a terrible fight with staves, and they break one another's heads and many die.

This solemn, but bloody, custom of worship was established for this reason: the mother of Ares used to dwell in this temple. Ares was brought up away from her and when he grew up he came to visit his mother. The attendants of his mother's temple had never seen him before and didn't know who he was so they kept him away. Ares found men to help him from a neighboring city, and got rough with the attendants, entered the temple and visited his mother. So this exchange of blows has become the custom in honor of Ares on his festival day.

WHAT'S UNDER AN ANT HILL?

By SANDY MILLER

THE study of the habits of ants is one of the most interesting subjects the insect world provides. Ants have many social classes: the royal caste, worker caste, warrior caste and slave caste. Among them they have gardeners, governesses, and hunters. They live in ant hills that are designed architecturally perfect, and every ant takes over at birth the task it was born to do for the common good of the ant hill.

We never stop to think of ants till we encounter one face to face in our picnic salad. We usually think of them as wingless as most of them are, but the royal caste have wings. They are the princesses who mate and become queens, each going to a new place and populating a new city, and also the princes who die soon after they mate. The winged females are the largest, then the winged males and then the wingless workers which are the smallest. Each queen starts her own ant nest. She pulls off her wings as soon as she has mated, and tunnels under ground and lays her eggs. She feeds the larvae on food which she brings up from her own stomach. It isn't very beneficial and there isn't enough to go around, therefore the first hatch of ants is quite small and wingless and become the workers of the various castes. The next hatch of ants fares much better because the first hatch has stocked the larder, and enlarged the ant hill and made hundreds of tunnels and galleries, storerooms, nurseries and gardens. Some ants go out hunting dead insects that are many times larger than themselves, and drag them back down into their pantries for the needs of the new babies. Some food gatherers have two stomachs, one for their own needs and one for bringing in the food for the babies. Others are dairy farmers who capture herds of plant lice and keep them in their barns and milk them regularly for the children. Some go out and load up on honey till they are about to burst then come home and suspend themselves by their hind legs from the ceiling of the pantry. Any little child ant that has a sweet tooth can come in and tap the mouth of the living honey cask.

The gardeners gather leaves and other vegetation. They ferment them and a little fungi or tiny mushroom grows out of it which they use for food. Perhaps they make a mushroom sauce to use over their beetle steaks.

Usually the workers are sexless. Perhaps the larvae is underfed so that it will fail to develop sex and wings and therefore remain in the worker caste. The best fed larvae get special food and have elegant nurseries and are carried way to the bottom of the ant hill when danger is near.

Some kinds of ants build huge ant hills six feet high but most of them make their elaborate homes under ground. Some species raid the homes of smaller ants, kill the soldiers, and carry off the egg cages from which will emerge young ants that will become their slaves. One kind has become so dependent on slave labor that without it they would perish. They would just starve to death rather than do a little work for themselves. Mankind might find a moral there.

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READER'S PAGE

THE ONLY PULP HE READS

Sirs:

I was first introduced to the Ziff-Davis line with the second issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. The colorful cover sold me on the magazine, and I enjoyed it so much that I went right out and bought an AMAZING STORIES. I've been reading every one of your pulps since then, and I might add that they are the only pulps I read.

One of the outstanding things about the Ziff-Davis line, I think, are the attractive covers. I think they alone bring in a lot of new readers because they are consistently the best and most colorful on the newsstands.

I've often wondered what happened to Eando Binder. His story, "The Little People" in one of the first issues of FA, was the most outstanding yarn ever written about fairies, goblins, and such. And there is Don Wilcox, who will always be one of the best fantasy writers in my opinion. We don't see as much of him now as we used to. . . . I think we all mourned the loss of such writers as David Wright O'Brien and Leroy Yerxa.

I'm quite curious about this Harold M. Sherman who wrote the "Up and Up" in MAMMOTH DETECTIVE, and a couple of novels for AMAZING a short while ago. Is he the same writer who used to write juvenile books some years back?

Keep up the good work in all your magazines. Keep Bill Hopson producing for MAMMOTH WESTERN and keep writers like Robert Moore Williams, Chester S. Geier, Richard S. Shaver, and William P. McGivern producing for FA.

Ray Allen Romer,
P.O. Box 833,
Idaho Falls, Idaho

We agree with you wholeheartedly that the Ziff-Davis pulps are the best buy on the newsstands! Why shouldn't they be—since they are the best! As to Eando Binder, he's been pretty busy the past few years working on comic strips. But you'll be seeing him again one of these days . . . And you're right about Harold M. Sherman. He turned out over fifty juvenile novels. And incidentally his sequel to "The Green Man" appeared in the last issue of AMAZING STORIES. But you've probably already read it. . . . You'll also be seeing the other writers you mentioned very frequently in the pages of the Ziff-Davis pulps. .....Ed.

PRAISE FOR ROG PHILLIPS

Sirs:

I have been contemplating writing to you for quite some time but have very inexcusably put it off, perhaps because I have never written to a magazine and am a little timid to begin with. But having just read the story, "High Ears" by Rog Phillips, I immediately knew I would have to write to you, and express, or rather try to express, my admiration for all the authors, the editors, and everyone connected with FA—and also for the staff of AMAZING STORIES.

Never have I encountered such terrifically written stories. They seem to captivate my whole being from the first page to the last. You see, I wouldn't think of letting a page go by without reading it thoroughly. In my estimation they are the tastiest food for the thinker there is on the Earth. Rog Phillips is just tops with me, especially since his superb novel, "So Shall Ye Reap." Words can't begin to express what feeling that story brought to the surface.

Also, I appreciate very much the high quality of art work that you have in your magazine. The illustrations perfectly complete one's mental conception of the stories.

I am anxiously looking forward to the coming issues of FA and AS.

Craig Burroughs,
4850 Marlborough Dr.,
San Diego 4, Calif.

Thanks loads for the praise, Craig, but for goodness sake don't be timid about writing us again. O. K?.....Ed.

THE BEST READER'S PAGE

Sirs:

I don't generally like "Shaver" stories, but "Witch of the Andes" in the October issue was quite fair. However, the art work excelled the story, and the cover was a real treasure. If I had a framable copy I'd be thrilled to death. It seems that the newsdealer always scribbles on it, and then, too, the printed words detract from the beauty of the cover.

"A Knotted String" by Livingston was a good yarn with a moral lesson. It had quite a lot of intelligence behind it, and though the plot was mediocre, that knotted string and the object lesson it gave the hero, made it worthwhile.

St. Reynard did all right on his Pegasus story. It was enjoyable throughout.

"The Hesitant Angel" by Larry Sternig was

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amusing and pretty. I enjoyed it, but wished it could have gone on and on. Such a pretty tale merits being enlarged on.

"Photo Finish" by Hickey was of interest. The St. Clair story, "Whenever The Sun Shines" was good. Her stories are always good!

The king of the issue, was, of course, "High Ears" by Rog Phillips. This story was a real jewel. After I read it I sat back satisfied. It was the best in many months. Congratulations to Phillips and get him to do some more like this.

And now about the Reader's Page. I want to give you a few orchids. Other magazines let certain readers in, or certain subjects, until the Reader's Page is not functioning for more than a few individuals or groups. Your magazine alone is outstanding in its democracy amongst the fan letters. Thanks from all of us who appreciate true justice. Your whole magazine is tops.

Gwen Cunningham,
4566 Ferntop Dr.,
Los Angeles 32, Calif.

We're mighty glad to hear your praise for our Reader's Page, Gwen. We've always tried to make it a policy to include as many letters from readers and different subjects as space will allow. We'll print as many pan letters—if we get them—as praise letters. All we ask is that you write!..Ed.

SHE'S CRAZY—SHE SAYS!

Sirs:

First off, I'm crazy about your magazine—or maybe just crazy. Got the October FA the night before last. I read first the features and the Reader's Page. The fact articles are the berries. As for the stories, many of them have already come true. I have been getting FA on and off for some years—as many as I could get since Johnstown doesn't get them often enough. And let me tell you I read FA from cover to cover.

I'm not much good at writing letters—my husband says I murder the English language. . . .

I like the Reader's Page for from time to time there are things in it that happen to real people, like finding strange caves, etc.

My husband and I are joining the Shaver Mystery Club, and any fans in Pa. that want to get in touch with me, that's o. k. Incidentally, we like "Toffee" very much.

Here's how the current stories rate with me: "High Ears" number one. Oh, boy, there's a story that really makes a gal dream. "Mr. Beller And The Winged Horse" number two. Plenty o.k. "The Hesitant Angel" number three. Good reading. "Witch Of The Andes" number four. Good, but I like love with my adventure. "Photo Finish" number five. Swell, something new. "A Knotted String" number six. Good, but not enough of it. Why didn't Livingston work a beautiful babe into the yarn? . . . And last, "Whenever The Sun Shines." Passable reading. As I told you, the true stories are swell. And when I start to read the fiction I just can't put the book down. It's a good thing you don't come out every week—or I'd never get any work done! Keep up the good work in coming issues.

Zeda P. Mishler,
423 Woodland Ave.,
Johnstown, Pa.

Well, we wouldn't exactly say you were crazy, Zeda—and even if you are we don't mind as long as it's about us! And you tell your husband that as far as we're concerned you can write a darned good letter—let's see him try his hand. We're also glad to hear you're joining the Shaver Mystery Club. And all the rest of you fans who haven't are missing a good thing. The address of the club is Chester S. Geier, 2414 Lawrence Ave., Chicago, Ill. We understand that Geier and Dick Shaver have done a whale of a job on their club magazine which contain's Shaver's "Thought-Record" story, "Mandark" the story of the Life of Christ. . . . As far as going weekly is concerned, Zeda, there's nothing we'd like better—if we had the paper! Maybe some day we'll get it and then watch out because we'll make sure you're kept busy—reading.....Ed.

PASS THE BOOK AROUND

Sirs:

Having just finished reading the October FA I want to say that I enjoyed the stories very much. But I liked "High Ears," better than any of the rest I've read for months, although AMAZING STORIES ran a yarn by Phillips, "So Shall Ye Reap" which was a close second. Here's hoping that Rog Phillips gets his stories in quite often. Well, must close now as my fellow soldiers want to read the new FA, too!

T/5 Warren G. Hicks,
R. A. 20933879,
Co. B, S.T.R.
Ft. Monmouth, N. J.

Okay, Warren, and we hope the rest of the boys enjoyed the yarns, too.....Ed.

A SHAVER CLASSIC

Sirs:

I have been a regular reader of your two magazines, FA and AS for many years now, and think they're tops in every way. Especially do I like the works of Don Wilcox, William P. McGivern, Berkeley Livingston, Chester S. Geier, and of course, Richard S. Shaver, who has the distinction of having written the best yarn I have ever read, namely, "An Adam From The Sixth." Truly a classic. Your best artists are Fuqua, Robert Gibson Jones, MacCauley, and Rod Ruth.

If possible, would you mention in the Reader's Section that I have science and fantasy books and magazines to trade. Anyone can get my list by writing me. . . . Thank you for two very fine science-fantasy magazines.

Charles L Morris,
50 Harris St.,
Anderson, S. C.

We've got some really great Shaver stories coming up soon, Chuck. .....Ed.

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COMMENTS ON THE COMMENTATORS

Sirs:

In the Sept. issue of FA I am turning to the Reader's Page because I have always admired this part of your magazine and I think that one reason it is not bigger is that the fans don't seem to pay enough attention to it. I know it's natural to talk about the stories, but I'd like to make a commentary on the commentators.

John H. Clayton:

Yes, I think the editor's choice of stories *is* decidedly wise. I thought the "Red Dwarf" was a very unusual story, a real fantasy, and it had a message of sorts for those who like to consider more than bare plot structures. However, I absolutely disagree with you in your comments on the "Toffee" stories by Charles Myers. I am neither for or against these stories, but I think they are well written and interesting to read. But in regard to your statements that the author is poor *because* he "imitates" Thorne Smith, all I can say is that ye Ed's well thought-out reply is quite correct. Enough said.

H. D. Massey:

While I was not so impressed with Richard Casey's "Carrion Crypt" as you were, I am glad you liked Elroy Arno's "Secret Of The Yomar." It was a fine story, and you can add my congratulations. I though that Sturgeon's masterpiece, "Largo" was much more than "rather nice." I can't see what that story lacked. I like Myers' style too, and particularly I liked the very pleasing passage you quoted. John H. Clayton evidently missed these touches in "Toffee Takes A Trip."

Your comments on "Goddess Of The Golden Flame" and "Peter Backs A Punch" were very well put, I think. However, you must bear in mind that the authors of both of these stories have turned in better work in the past. More power to your suggestion that FA continue with "more Arno and Casey." And I would also add, Chester S. Geier, Theodore Sturgeon, Robert Moore Williams, Richard S. Shaver, and Rog Phillips.

James W. Ayers:

Again I agree that Elroy Arno's "Secret Of The Yomar" was a fine yarn. I disagree, however, in your statement that it was the second time that the lead novels have been beaten out by a short, because that means you didn't place Shaver's "The Tale Of The Red Dwarf" in first place—where it rightly belongs I try to judge a story by its intrinsic worth, not its length, so I find the following stories on my favorite list in recent issues: "Largo," a short by Sturgeon; "The Tale Of The Red Dwarf," a short novel by Shaver; "Man Of Two Worlds," a novelette by Bob Williams; "Happiness Is Nowhere," a novelette by Chet Geier; "Cult Of The Eagle," a novelette by Berkeley Livingston; and "An Adam From The Sixth," a short by Richard S. Shaver.

William Muir Cox:

A very good tribute to Richard S. Shaver's classic. When you read the rest of the yarns you probably found two more fine stories in "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" by Ray Bradbury, and "Meet My Mummy," by Elroy Arno.

James L. Cribelar:

I'm afraid that Leroy Yerxa's "The Emperor's Eye" has been thoroughly debunked by Jay Williams. In my opinion David Wright O'Brien has written better things than "Painting Of The Prophet." His two best were "Victory From The Void" and "Private Prune Speaking." Another good comment on Shaver's "Tale Of The Red Dwarf." I was not so impressed with "Forever Is Too Long" by Chester S. Geier, although I recognize that it is a fine story. I think his three classics are: "Happiness Is Nowhere," "Haunted Metropolis," and "Getaway." In ye Ed's reply to your letter I notice that he seems to have a fixation on the poor PhD's. He is wrong. Agreement or disagreement with Richard Shaver is not determined by a man's profession or education.

Jay Williams:

A very careful criticism of a story that evidently needed it. Letters like that are valuable to the fans. I agree 100% to the principle of this letter although I am not an authority on Roman times so I cannot verify it. Your last paragraph is certainly an Editor's model! Ye Ed's feeble attempt to squirm out of an argument which he should have considered won by you was not the sort of thing I like to see an editor do. It was only fair of him to say that Leroy Yerxa *tried* to make his story accurate by doing research work, but he should not have used that unconvincing alibi about an author sometimes finding it "necessary" to deviate "slightly" from the facts "as we know them." An author should *never* find it "necessary" to distort history in that amateurish way because magnificent flights of "historical" fantasy can be written without making any glaring errors in his background.

Miss Elaine Scott:

You have another good view of "The Tale Of The Red Dwarf." I rated it first too. Also, you express my feelings about "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" exactly. And I rated it second, too! "The Emperor's Eye" apparently does not have a good historical background and I also agree with you that the magical-bit-of-glass theme has been overdone. A good description of "Shades Of Henry Morgan." I agree about your "phony love interest" feeling. Your comments on "Painting Of The Prophet" and "When The Spirit Moves Me" are mine also. Incidentally the latter title is probably derived from a popular song of some years ago. You rather surprised me in your comparison of "Meet My Mummy" to Raymond Chandler's style, but I am forced to admit, looking back on the story, that you are right. Nevertheless, I still like it better than many other stories in the issue. But, then, I like Raymond Chandler's style, and I, like Ye Ed, do not recognize the terms copy or imitation

(Continued on page 172)

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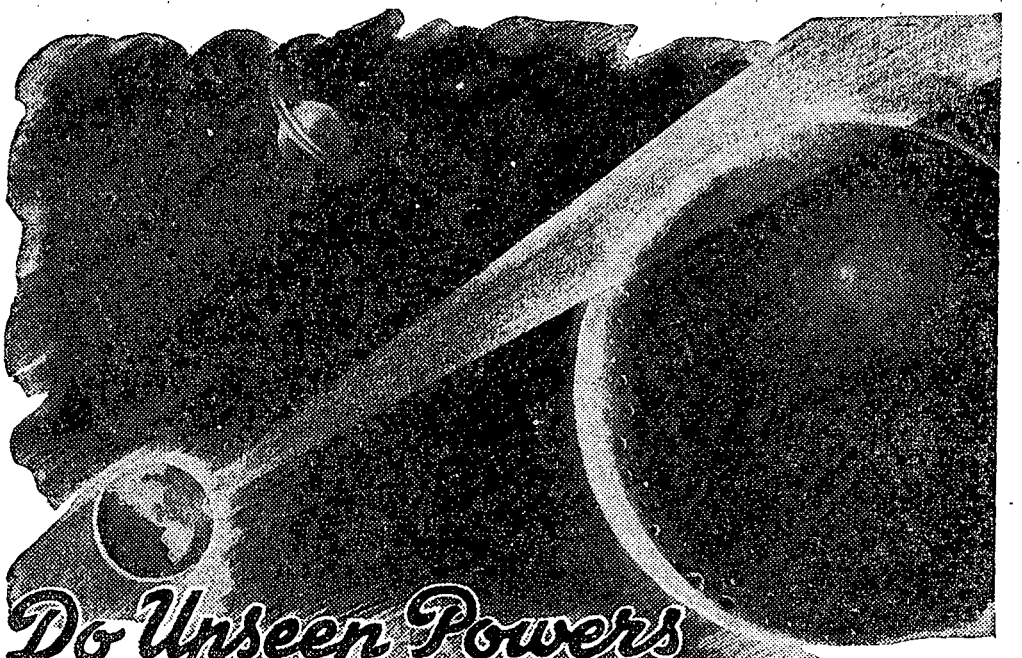

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(Continued from page 170)

when applied to literature. I think *influence* describes the actual situation much better and also should explain why I and many other people do not object to one author's style "resembling" that of another writer.

. . . Well, that's my commentary on the commentators. I though that the best letter in the issue was by Jay Williams, second by Miss Elaine Scott, and third by the Editor in his answer to John H. Clayton. Well, that's all for now.

R. R. Anger,
520 Highland Ave.,
Ottawa, Ont., Canada.

A very interesting letter, quite complete, and needing little or no comment by us—but how about the rest of you readers?.....Ed.

RIGHT AT THE TOP

Sirs:

A home run with the bases loaded for Rog Phillips! In my opinion his "High Ears" ranks well up at the head of such a select body of stories as "Out Of The Test Tube" and "Slan." Phillips' explanations of scientific terms were so clear and to the point that the whole story fitted into a pattern which is very rare in stf authors today and which I have found with few exceptions including the ones mentioned above, only in recognized novels such as those written by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. It is a refreshing experience indeed to find such a tale within the confines of my own FA. Good for Phillips.

The other stories are as follows: In second place, "Witch Of The Andes," a fine fantasy by a fine writer. In third, "Mr. Beller And The Winged Horse," let's have more about Mr. Beller. In fourth, "A Knotted String," could be, but I doubt it. In fifth, "Photo Finish," phoo! In sixth, "Whenever The Sun Shines," double phoo!

This issue, in the style of writing, anyway, could set a big example for issues yet to come, right at the top.

James Wyatt,
5021 Madison,
Richmond, Cal.

Just keep your eyes on the coming issues, James, and you'll seee some mighty fine yarns. And in regards to the three you mentioned, yes, they were mighty fine yarns. But we've got a lot more home runs waiting for you.....Ed.

HIS TOP TEN AUTHORS

Sirs:

I have just purchased the October FA and hasten to make a bid for the beautiful front cover. In my estimation this cover is by far the best I have ever seen on *any* magazine!

There are many things I like especially about your magazine, that seldom if ever, get any acknowledgment from the readers. One of these is the custom you originated of putting beside the title of the story on the contents page the number of words in the story. Never set this custom aside. Also, I always enjoy reading the delightful Editor's Page. I don't have to remind you that the size of the printing in your magazine is larger than in any of the others, making easier reading. And another feature I particularly enjoy is the cartoons you run off and on.

As for your stories, they are always good. Here is my list of favorite writers:

1. Harold M. Sherman—his novels.
2. Rog Phillips—all his yarns.
3. Don Wilcox—all of his.
4. Edmond Hamilton—"Star King" can't be beat.
5. Robert Bloch—"Lefty Feep" stories.
6. Richard Shaver—a great writer.
7. William L. Hamling—what happened to him?
8. Chester S. Geier—ditto?
9. Robert Moore Williams—always good.
10. Berkeley Livingston—at last a novel!

Those are my ten favorite writers. I have only two favorite cover artists: Robert Gibson Jones and H. W. MacCauley.

Malcolm Smith does good on space themes. James Settles on sea themes. Arnold Kohn on your detective magazines. Bob Jones again on *Mammoth Western*. Incidentally, who did the cover for the January, 1947 issue of *Mammoth Adventure?* My guess is Malcolm Smith. Am I right? . . . By the way, I read and enjoy all of your magazines, but FA is my top favorite...

Burnett Toskey,
P.O. Box 482,
El Cajon, Cal.

We're mighty proud, and glad you like our "behind the scenes" features. We think it's little touches like some of the ones you mentioned that go into the making of a good magazine. We call it "creative editing," and we're always looking for something new to give our readers. Of the two writers in your list of ten favorites that you ask about, the first is writing this reply to you, and the second—do you really mean you haven't seen Chet Geier in FA or AS lately? Chet has had some fine stories, including novels, during the past year. Remember "Forever Is Too Long" in FA, or "Hidden City" in AS, or "The Golden SixGun" in MW, not to mention numerous shorts. And we agree with you on our artists. They are the best in the field. That cover on the January MA was not done by Smith, however, it was by Bob Jones. How did you like the cover on this issue?.....Ed.

WANTS BACK COPIES

Sir:

I just started to read your magazine and I for one believe it is one of the best books I have ever read. I started around 1945 and I find that I need the following issues of FA: Volume 8 from number six up. Volume 7, numbers 1, 2, 3, and from 6 up. In *Amazing Stories* Volume 19 numbers 1, 2, and from 5 up. Anyone able

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to supply me with these magazines, please write me.

Ronald Bennett,
1422 Rose St.,
La Crosse, Wis.

There you are, Ronald, and you should get a lot of replies from fans. .....Ed.

A NEW READER

Sirs:

I just bought my first copy of FA. Why didn't I discover it sooner? You have yourself a new reader and fan from now on.

Juanita Ryan,
700 Excelsior St.,
Akron, Ohio.

Glad to have you join us, Juanita. And let's hear from you again. .....Ed.

SEQUEL WANTED

Sirs:

This is the first fan letter I have written, but the story, "High Ears" was quite an unusual story in my estimation. You see, it made me want to read a sequel. What happened after the High Ears race conquered the Earth? Don't tell me they didn't because a brain equal to Harvey's (he might have been exceptional even for a high ears) or even half his intellect could take over this world painlessly and with benefits that would make humans think it was their own idea.

There were thousands of them. How were they distributed—study the problem of D.P.'s already on Earth and you'll see why I ask. Were some female, or all male? Come now, I'd like to have the answer in a sequel.

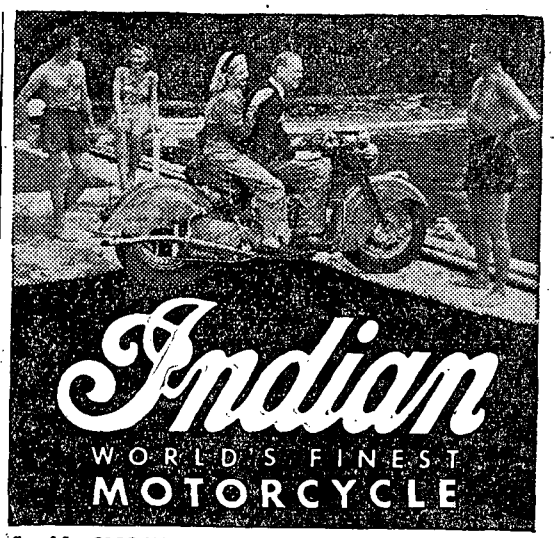
I liked the Pegasus story, and then "Witch of the Andes." The others were all right with or above the usual standard of FA stories.

I always like the yarns, as long as they reconcile with the facts. I mean, a man can come back from the dead—as a stf reader I concede that—but he's got to be bound by certain limitations: Not talk if he could make a story more thrilling by not talking, pages before, when he would have given away the plot.

Well, while we're at it, a good example of a bad story was the movie the "Ghost Goes Wild." The ghost knew something which made every bad character step into line, but the audience was told—"Don't you wish you knew!"—just plain laziness on the author's part. Not bothering to figure out the solution he had an invisible ghost whisper to the "bad ones" and left it at that. Guess I better close now.

A. Bernice Clark,
219 Rockwood Blvd.,
Spokane 10, Wash.

We'll tell Rog Phillips and maybe he can be persuaded to do a sequel.....Ed.



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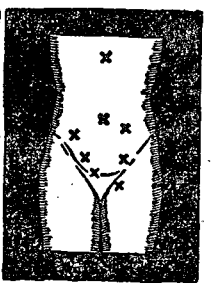

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Sirs:

As you will find this letter singularly free of the usual chummy pap and unwarranted eulogy that characterizes most of your readers' correspondence to this publication, the possibilities of its being printed are remote. Notwithstanding my prescience of this paper's probable bourne, viz: a wastebasket, I feel it to be my obligation to make known my disapproval of the type of story you are currently favoring.

With each succeeding issue of *Fantastic Adventures* the wonderfully subtle and gelid fane of illusion, painstakingly erected by such masters as Poe, Blackwood, Merritt, and Collins, is being more horribly desecrated.

The sort of pap that you are trying to foist upon your intelligent reader is unspeakably bad. I believe that the late H. P. Lovecraft once said that the thing making a horror story or phantasy story successful is the possibility of its actually happening. Using that axiom as a criterion by which to judge the stories in *Fantastic Adventures*, I am forced to subsume all of them under the category Failures.

A noteworthy example of sheer jargon is to be found in your magazine's latest feature story, "Witch of the Andes." The author of this "impressive" opus had one of his characters say: "The body of man can be considered as a series of cells of separate natures whose symbiotic relations are a result of long ages of interaction between their many once divergent life-forms . . ."

Now, all cells are not dissimilar; they are fundamentally alike. Thus biological texts are able to print diagramatic representations of generalized cells. Symbiosis in cell life will have to be explained to me, as I am astute enough to see its possibility. Also, new cells can develop by division only, a fact which seems to negate the worth of the whole theory.

It is my holding that several pages of *appropriate* poetry per issue is a desideratum. Several of the rival phantasy-fiction magazines have instituted this feature already.

As it appears that a nadir in textual quality has been reached, I look forward to enjoying a regenerated *Fantastic Adventures*.

Deeny D. Larke,
808 Sunset Ave.,
Windsor, Ont., Can.

Youse is hep, Deeny Boy!.....Ea.

HIS FIRST LETTER

Sirs:

I am fourteen years old, and have been collecting science-fantasy for some years. I have saved eight stories out of all I have read. Half of them are from FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. One is "The Land of the Big Blue Apples" by Don Wilcox. This is a delightful and interesting story, and Wilcox is one of my favorite authors. I always read his stories with interest. Another

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one of my favorites is "The Return of Circe" by Nat Schachner. Also, "Union in Gehenna" by Nelson S. Bond, who is also one of my favorites. Another great story, I thought, was "I'll Dream of You" by Charles F. Myers. I liked this yarn very much and think it is by far the best of the "Toffee" series so far. My favorite artist is Robert Gibson Jones. I think he's great.

This is my first letter to any magazine, so I don't expect it to be printed. Just the same, I'll be waiting for next month's FA with open arms, hoping for another "Toffee" story as good as the first one, a Don Wilcox story, and of course, a cover by Bob Jones.

Marie Lenhof,
94 Lexington Ave.,
Buffalo 9, N.Y.

Well, there you are, Marie, your first letter did get printed! Just make sure it isn't your last one—we'll be waiting to hear from you again. Incidentally, how did you like the "Toffee" story in the November issue? .....Ed.

VON COSEL AND "DEATH"

Sirs:

This is my first letter to any magazine, and I have written it because of the deep interest aroused in me by the story entitled, "The Secret of Elena's Tomb", in which Karl Tanzler von Cosel reveals an amazing and unknown meaning for the word "death." He describes it as being, in some cases, a cataleptic state, and, if true, I think it will explain the fact that many a body has been dug up after years of burial without showing any signs of decay.

I believe that the true scientists, the men who do not deny the truth of a phenomenon before it is proved untrue, will find it worth more than just one experiment.

With the hopes of hearing more of von Cosel's ideas, I am very truly yours,

Armando Fortuna,
Rua Noronha Santos 137,
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

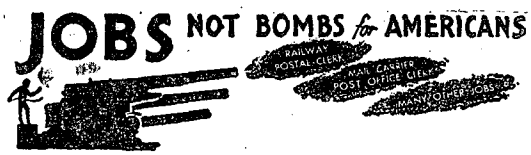
There are a great many mysteries that science has neglected to check up on, and certainly von Cosel's theory and experiment is one of them. Ed.

AN AMAZING PHENOMENON

Sirs:

I have read FA and AS since I was twelve years old, but this is the first time I have written you a letter. I have always found the character of your stories to my liking and didn't bother to give an opinion before. However, von Cosel's story in the September issue last year, "The Secret of Elena's Tomb" has caused me to do more thinking and wondering than anything I have ever read, except the "Shaver Mystery."

Something has happened here recently that ties up with von Cosel's beliefs. I haven't got all the information on it, but the story was told to me by a friend of the family who is not the type of person who tells wild tales. Any-



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way, here is the story as it was told to me, and you can investigate it and find out for yourselves.

There is an Italian family known in the neighborhood of 69th St. & 14th Ave. in Brooklyn, as the Brigadiers. Around the first of August one of their daughters died of an extended illness. Four hours after her death (with a doctor present) the family and friends were grouped in the house discussing funeral arrangements with the undertaker. One of them happened to glance into the adjoining room where the dead girl was lying on a bed. The deceased's eyes began to open slowly and her lips began to move. Then she called for her mother in a low but clear voice. The shocked people rushed into the room. The girl sat up by herself and asked is someone wouldn't get her a bottle of ginger ale as she felt very thirsty. They got her a bottle of ginger ale and she immediately drank it. Within the next four hours she drank two more bottles of ginger ale and talked to them. She was examined thoroughly by the doctor present, but he could find no traces of life—no heartbeat, no breathing, her body cold—and yet she was sitting up, talking to them, and drinking.

She told her family not to grieve over her and that she was sorry for any trouble she had caused them. She told them that she had some bad news to tell them, but not to take it too hard. She spoke then directly to one of her sisters and told her that within two weeks she too would die. Then, after four hours of this strange "revived life" she lay back still. . .

But here is the unusual thing: The sister whom she had addressed died exactly two weeks later! Now I think this story is true, but whether it is or not, it is worth looking into. Your magazine has shown great courage in the past in printing stories and articles which disagree with some of the accepted theories of "down-to-earth" scientists. Keep up the good work, and here's one reader you will never lose.

Darrell A. Oaks,
182 Bay 8 St.,
Brooklyn, N.Y.

A very interesting and unusual account, Darrell. If the story as you have related it is indeed true, and we have no evidence at hand to disprove it, then it is certainly a piece of evidence in favor of von Cosel's own experiments. Any readers who have any knowledge of this particular incident are invited to write to us. .....Ed.

NOTHING UNUSUAL

Sirs:

The October issue of FA was nothing unusual. First was Shaver's "Witch of the Andes." Glad to see him again in FA. "Mr. Beller and the Winged Horse" and "Whenever the Sun Shines" were also two good stories. "The Hesitant Angel" was readable but too short. A smart ending though. I won't make any comment on the other stories.

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Next issue ought to be good with Livingston's "Lamp of Vengeance." I hope so, as the lead novels haven't been too good lately.

James W. Ayers,
609 1st St.,
Attalla, Ala.

Well, we're glad to see you liked the stories anyway, James. And we think the novels will prove to be top-notch from now on. .....Ed.

FIRST FOR MR. BELLER

Sirs:

I like your magazine very much. In fact, I place it second only to one magazine, *Amazing Stories*. I have just finished reading your October issue. Naturally "Mr. Beller and the Winged Horse" took first place. I think a sequel for it would be in order.

Next, of course, was "High Ears" by Rog Phillips. Very good. But that's to be expected of Rog. Then I place "Witch of the Andes" third. This story was so much unlike most of Shaver's stories that it was actually good. . . . And last, "A Knotted String" by Berkeley Livingston. The rest were too short. And say, what's happened to "Toffee"? And am I glad to see that J. W. Pelkie is coming back with another "Toka" story.

The cover for the October issue was especially good. The interiors were fair.

Jim B. Wilson,
1407½ 12th St.
Wichita Falls, Tex.

You've probably already read the latest "Toffee" story in the November issue. We're willing to bet that you'll say it's the best yarn Myers has turned out thus far. And also let us know what you thought of the new "Toka" story which appeared last month. .....Ed.

CALLING MR. CLAYTON

Sirs:

I have been reading FA, I believe, since it was published the first time—and have always enjoyed it very much.

Like John H. Clayton, this is my first letter to an editor of any magazine, and I probably wouldn't be writing this one if Clayton hadn't called Charles F. Myers' "Toffee" a cheap imitation of "Topper Takes a Trip"—and rotten.

I disagree very much with Clayton. In my estimation, "Toffee" is a very likeable creature and I hope Mr. Myers will pop up with her more often in spite of people like Clayton.

The stories in FA that I haven't cared for have been so few that I won't try to remember them. FA is my favorite magazine and will continue to be as long as it publishes stories of the same calibre as in the past.

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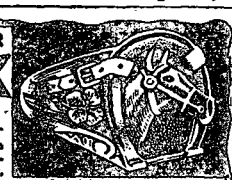

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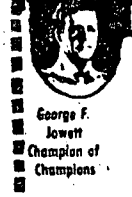

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Charles Fort, in his "Book of the Damned," would seem to agree with this latter view that the shadow was a luminous object near the moon suddenly lost to view, but then its shadow underneath was seen.

In 1879 two astronomers, H. C. Russell and G. D. Hirst, were observing the moon in the Blue mountains near Sydney, Australia. They saw a "large part of the moon covered with a dark shade, quite as dark as the shadow of the earth during an eclipse of the moon." Both men being scientists this was as far as they would care to go in their description. But the fact remains that they did *see* something, something impossible but true! And they were men who were well versed in astronomy and who knew that what they saw was not a part of the normal pattern of things.

Did they see an eclipse? If so, then it must have been an eclipse that science knew nothing about. Was it in actuality a living creature, much like a bird? If so, how could it have lived in the utter cold and lifelessness of outer space?

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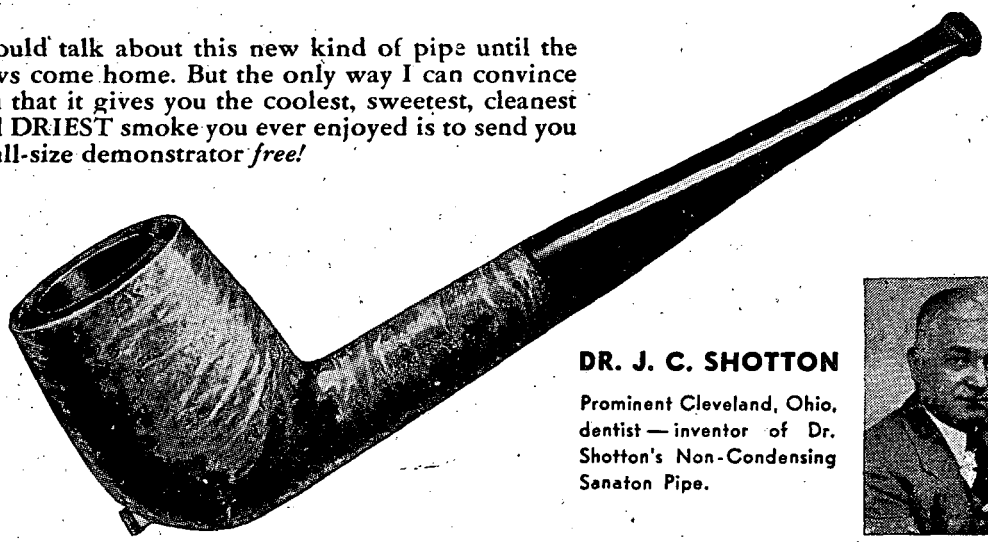
THIS NON-CONDENSING SANATON "DEMONSTRATOR" PIPE

(Just Enclose 10c to Cover Postage and Packing)

I could talk about this new kind of pipe until the cows come home. But the only way I can convince you that it gives you the coolest, sweetest, cleanest and DRIEST smoke you ever enjoyed is to send you a full-size demonstrator *free!*



DR. J. C. SHOTTON

Prominent Cleveland, Ohio, dentist — inventor of Dr. Shotton's Non-Condensing Sanaton Pipe.

IF YOU are a pipe smoker, I know how skeptical you are about new pipe inventions. So before expecting you to *buy* one of my SANATON pipes, I am offering you this DEMONSTRATOR *free!* My demonstrator will serve the purpose of proving to you that the unique SANATON NON-CONDENSING and EASY-CLEANING features give you the driest, sweetest, coolest and cleanest smoke you ever enjoyed from any pipe, regardless of name, make, or price! I am gambling that if my "demonstrator" does this, you will want one of my better grades. If not, you're out nothing except the 10c I ask for to help pay the postage and handling on the demonstrator

What This "Demonstrator" Must Prove

Dr. Shotton's non-condensing Sanaton pipe is now being enjoyed by nearly 100,000 pipe smokers—all of whom bought it after *trying* it! Some of these fellows have been smoking pipes for 30, 40, or even 50 years. Some have from 50 to 200 pipes in their collections, and they like the Sanaton better than all the rest put together! There must be a *reason,* and here it is:

Most ordinary pipes, as you know, are equipped with tubes, traps, filters, baffles and gadgets of all kinds whose purpose it is to catch and hold "goo." However, Dr. Shotton *knew* that these gadgets actually caused *condensation* of the "goo" they collected—just as a cool pitcher of ice water in a warm room causes moisture to condense on the outer surface of the glass! He realized that the *real secret* of a dry, sweet pipe is to *prevent* "goo" from forming at all!

Now, what did Dr. Shotton do? Well, instead of placing a catch-all gadget in the Sanaton pipe, he placed a small slotted tube at the bottom of the *bowl!* This tube acts as a NON-condenser, for as you light this pipe, the tube warms up—and there's no cold surface on which "goo" can condense! No condensation, no "goo"! It's as simple as that!

Then Dr. Shotton went a step further. He extended the non-condenser tube *through* the back wall of the pipe and attached a tiny removable screw. Whenever you want to clean out the *tar* that results from tobacco *combustion,* just remove the screw and run a regular pipe cleaner through from end to end. The Sanaton cleans like a gun!

AMAZING FREE OFFER!

As I said before, I don't expect you to buy my regular Sanaton until you try my demonstrator with its non-condensing and easy-cleaning features. So, I'll send you a demonstrator FREE *(just send 10c to help cover postage and handling).* Then if I don't hear from you within two weeks, I'll send you one of my *genuine imported briar* Sanatons and you can pay for it when it arrives. But—if you don't like the way my Sanaton *demonstrator* smokes—if you don't find it to be the driest, sweetest, cleanest and coolest smoke you *ever* had, just tell me so and I'll cancel your reservation. Isn't that a fair and square proposition?

Be sure to tell me whether you want me to reserve a Regular Sanaton at $2.50, DeLuxe Sanaton at $3.75 or Sterling Sanaton at $5.00 All my Sanatons are made of genuine aged imported briar—the only difference is in the quality, grain and finish. Be sure to let me know whether you prefer a large, medium or small bowl. *(Only one demonstrator to a person, please.)*

FREE DEMONSTRATOR COUPON

MARK FOSTER, Dept. DA-106
257 Fourth Ave., New York 10, N. Y.

Dear Mark: Please send me one of your Sanaton demonstrator pipes (I am enclosing 10c to cover postage and handling), and reserve a genuine Aged Imported Briar Sanaton for me in the size and grade checked below. If I don't like the way the demonstrator smokes, I will cancel my reservation within two weeks—otherwise send it to me and I will pay the postman for it (plus few cents postage) when it arrives. (Check one box in each column.)

☐ Regular, $2.50	☐ Small bowl
☐ De Luxe, $3.75	☐ Medium bowl
☐ Sterling, $5.00	☐ Large bowl

Name .....

Address .....

City, Zone, State .....

NOTE: If you want your genuine briar Sanaton at once, enclose remittance and I'll send it along with the demonstrator, prepaid. Smoke the demonstrator—and if you don't like it, return the genuine briar Sanaton unsmoked for refund. For your courtesy in remitting with coupon, I will include a big bunch of extra long pipe cleaners free.

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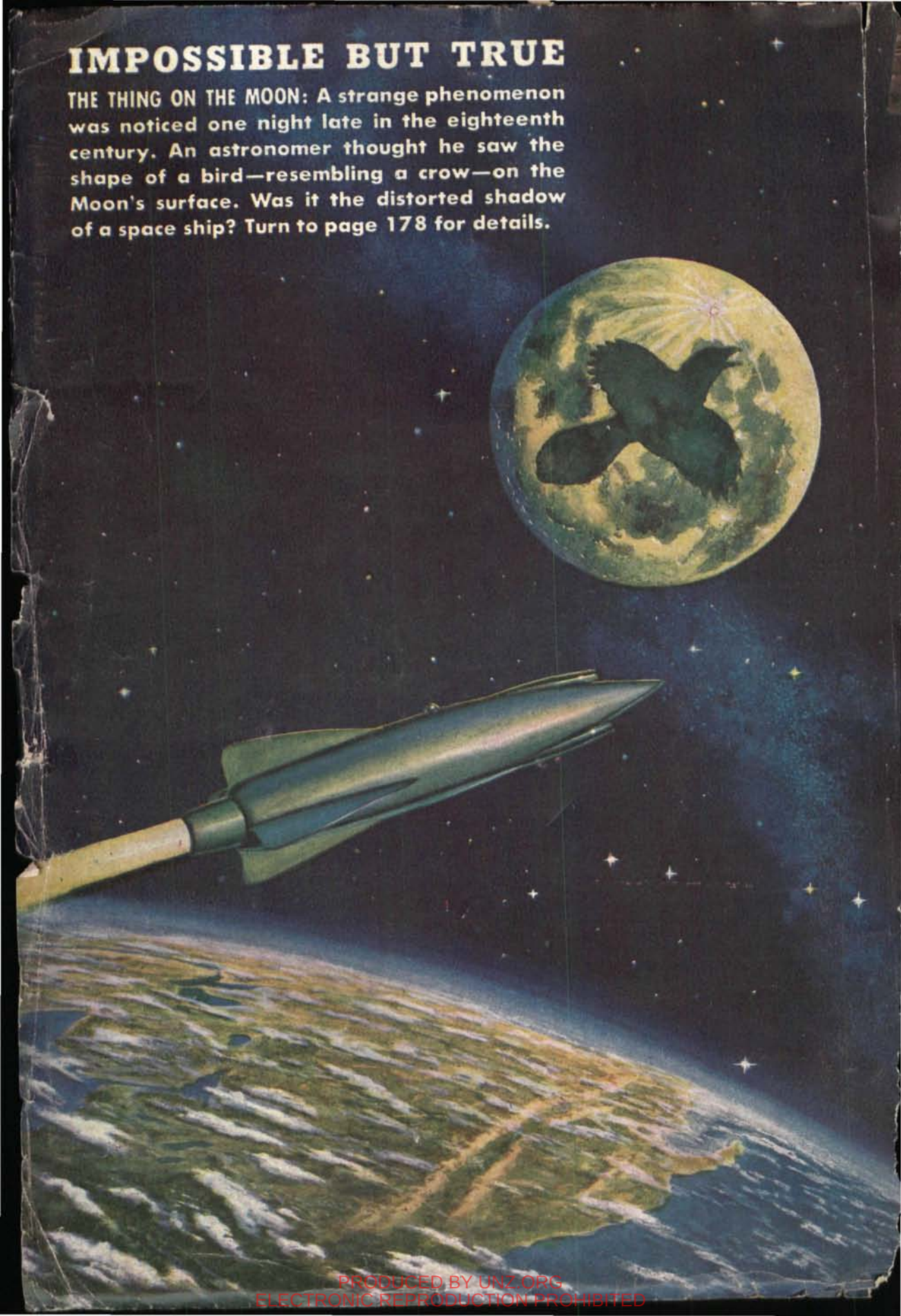
IMPOSSIBLE BUT TRUE

THE THING ON THE MOON: A strange phenomenon was noticed one night late in the eighteenth century. An astronomer thought he saw the shape of a bird—resembling a crow—on the Moon's surface. Was it the distorted shadow of a space ship? Turn to page 178 for details.



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